Ann Wilson



Fearful Symmetry

A Terran Empire Novel

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FEARFUL SYMMETRY

A Terran Empire Novel

by Ann Wilson

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Chapter I

Deep Space, 2568 CE

For the first time in his century-long career, Fleet-Captain Arjen of Clan D'gameh disapproved of a mission he had been given. That his orders came straight from the Supreme made no difference to his feelings, nor did the First Speaker's assurance that the Circle of Lords deemed it vital to the survival of the Traiti race.

It wasn't the goal of the mission that disturbed him, as much as the means. In the war between the Traiti and the Terran Empire, two things were, if not exactly sacred, proprieties that both sides respected. One was hospital ships, and the other was the return of bodies to their kin. By extension, ships delivering wounded or picking up dead were also immune, a principle that

neither side had violated … yet.

Arjen and his reinforced fleet were about to violate that unwritten taboo. The Fleet-Captain looked around his flagship's control central, conscious that nobody else aboard the Hermnaen knew of the planned deceit. He traced the honor-scars on his upper body through the cloth of his shirt, wishing he were elsewhere and free of the orders that seemed so dishonorable—then he told himself sternly to get on with it.

His mission was to deliver one of the Terran Empire's elite, one of the green-uniformed Rangers, safely to the Supreme and First Speaker on Homeworld. Although that sounded simple enough, it would take both firepower and trickery. Arjen's fleet, now with sixty ships instead of forty, had firepower enough to overwhelm even a Sovereign-class Terran battle cruiser, the type of ship a Ranger normally used. Fifty-nine of the Traiti warcraft were in positions that englobed a point in space a quarter-million n'liu from a blue-and-white oxygen planet—over forty diameters out, nearly in the orbit of the planet's moon.

The Hermnaen was still at the center of the twenty-n'liu-diameter sphere of ships, its Ship-Captain and crew waiting for Arjen's orders. Still reluctant to begin the trickery that was part of this operation, Arjen spoke anyway. "Release signal transmitter."

"Aye, Fleet-Captain." Battle discipline was strict, if fair; not even an action as apparently senseless as releasing a beacon in the center of a combat-ready fleet was questioned.

Then the Hermnaen took its own position in the sphere and Arjen ordered the beacon activated. The moment the distinctive paired triple-pings, used only for body-return containers, sounded on the ship's receivers, Arjen found himself the focus of fourteen pairs of eyes, from the

ship's operators in their U of consoles facing him and the Master-Pilot and Ship-Captain Exvani, whose consoles flanked Arjen's at the opening of the U—but not even those senior officers spoke their questions aloud.

It wasn't necessary; Arjen knew they shared the shock and dismay he'd felt when he was given this mission, and he was sure similar feelings were spread throughout the Fleet. He sighed and displayed resignation by extending the claws on one hand. "Give me Fleet Communications."

"Aye, Fleet-Captain." The Communications operator's attention returned to his console, and within minutes Arjen was in communication with all his Ship-Captains.

Without preamble and without expression, Arjen briefed them on the mission and detailed his plans for its execution. "The Intelligence Service reports intercepting communications involving a Ranger named Esteban Tarlac, which indicate that he is in this sector. Given what we know of Rangers, he will have his own ship respond, and given the skill of those who pilot Rangers' vessels, it will out-transition from hyperspace within ten n'liu of the beacon."

"Ten n'liu!" a newly-assigned Ship-Captain exclaimed.

"They are quite competent," Arjen said drily, "and they will take time to be accurate. I think that estimate, if anything, is conservative. You have seen little action against the Terrans?"

"None, Fleet-Captain." The officer sounded reluctant to admit that, but went on. "My ship and I are normally on colony patrol. This will be our first battle."

Arjen hid his brief amusement at the young Ship-Captain's obvious anticipation; he had felt

that way himself, early in the war. "Not if things go well. In this engagement, it is most desirable that Ranger Tarlac come willingly—or as willingly as possible under the circumstances. To simplify the decision for him, we are insuring that his ship will out-transition in the center of a battle-ready fleet. All ships will therefore go onto secondary alert status immediately, and will maintain that status until the Terrans appear. It will probably be two or three tenth-days before that happens. When they do, you will go to primary alert status without waiting for my orders. I want all weapons ready to fire, but no one is to do so without my express orders. Are there any questions?"

There were none, so Arjen dismissed the captains and went to his cabin, regretting, not for the first time, that senior commanders had to have private quarters—but too-close personal contact with his subordinates would be bad for discipline.

Still, he thought as he unrolled his sleeping mat and settled down in an attempt to relax, at least he would get some personal benefit from this mission; whether it succeeded or failed, he was to deliver his report to the Supreme himself. That meant a short leave, which he could and would spend at D'gameh clanhome. Arjen closed his eyes with a smile, anticipating the reunion with his clanmates, especially his two sons. Lazno, the elder, was due a leave, and Reja said Mahas was starting to talk. It would be good to see them all again, and Homeworld's still-peaceful countryside. There was the bed of star-shaped hermnaen flowers that gave his ship its name, in the clanhome's garden...

Arjen rested, satisfied for the moment with his life.

Ranger Esteban Tarlac was on the bridge of the Imperial Battle Cruiser Empress Lindner when the ultrawave body-retrieval signal came in. He looked up, abandoning his study of the

Damage Control board, and went to stand beside Captain Jean Willis. In the few seconds that took him, Navigation Officer Mueller had reported to his Captain.

"Not too far off our course," Willis commented. "What about it, Ranger? Should we make the pickup?"

"Why not?" Tarlac agreed. "A few hours' delay won't matter, and as I recall, we're the closest ship."

"Right, sir." Willis turned her attention to her officers. "Lieutenant Matthews, inform the Palace and Fleet HQ about the change in flight plan. Ask Fleet to have a morgue detail waiting when we get back to Luna Base. Ensign Olorun, bring us out of hyperspace for the course change."

Communications and Helm officers answered as one: "Yes, sir." Transitioning out of hyperspace was simple, even in the middle of a programmed course; Ensign Olorun flipped a switch on his Helm console, puncturing the hyperfield and bringing them to rest relative to what little matter was present in interstellar normspace.

The Navigator didn't need orders; he began plotting a course to the signal source as soon as the Lindner made her out-transition. With the ship-comp's aid, the calculations took less than a minute. "Coordinates ready, Captain," he reported.

Ensign Olorun was as efficient as his crewmate; as soon as Mueller gave him the final coordinates, he entered them into his own console and programmed the course. "All green, sir," he said.

Willis smiled. She, like the others aboard, had had to earn the privilege of serving on a Sovereign-class cruiser, and having a Ranger aboard brought the crew to its maximum efficiency. "Execute transition."

"Aye, sir."

At Olorun's words, everyone aboard felt the oddly pleasant twisting sensation as the hyperfield built up. The stars flared, then the screens went blank as the ship transitioned into hyperspace.

Tarlac still found it moderately amusing that hyperspace transition, once generally imagined to be at least uncomfortable and very possibly disabling, had proven to be anything but—to be the exact opposite, in fact. As a boy, he'd enjoyed daydreaming that he himself might make a discovery as unsettling as that particular one of Nannstein's, but so far he hadn't, and it didn't seem at all likely he would. On the other hand, it was just the unlikeliness of such a discovery—one that completely reversed a commonly-held idea—that made it so unsettling.

He grinned fleetingly to himself at the thought of how unlikely hyperflight, or even the Empire itself, must have seemed to an ordinary Terran back when Armstrong and Aldrin had made the first landing on Luna, but then he dismissed those unproductive if interesting ramblings. He had work to finish before the ship got back to Luna Base and he went on to Terra.

Five hours later, Tarlac was back on the bridge. He had no real reason to be there, but he enjoyed watching the choreographic precision of a Naval bridge crew, especially this one. He called on the Lindner every time he needed something with the power of a battle cruiser, and he praised her highly in the mock-serious arguments Rangers had with each other about the merits of

their chosen ships—even over the performance of such a simple maneuver as the retrieval of body-return containers.

Tarlac had often wondered about the puzzle those containers presented. The Traiti had initiated the body exchanges, and nobody could even guess at the reason. There had been no communication, nothing except the sudden signal that led to cautious recovery of the first container. It had been examined even more cautiously, but had proven as harmless as had all of the later pickups. There weren't many; space battles left few recognizable bodies. Even ground battles left few, since hand-held blasters at full power or molecular disruptors literally vaporized unarmored targets, and if enough of them overloaded an armored target's screen generator, the resulting explosion had the same practical effect. Most of the recovered bodies were victims of accident or of the rare hand-to-hand combat.

The Ranger brought his attention back to the bridge as Olorun reported ten seconds until out-transition. "Five credits says we're within fifteen klicks," the young Helmsman added with a grin.

"You're on," Tarlac laughed. "Optimist!"

"We'll see, sir. Out-transitioning … now."

There was a moment of silence as the ship re-entered normspace and stars appeared on the viewscreen, followed by murmurs of dismay. Captain Willis slapped the General Quarters alarm, swearing briefly but bitterly. "Damn! It was a trap!" The Traiti violation of something which had been sacrosanct was almost as shocking as the overwhelming number of the angular yet graceful Traiti ships.

"When they set up an ambush," Tarlac observed quietly, "it's a good one. There's enough firepower out there to vaporize us three times over."

"Yeah," Willis agreed, equally quiet. "Well, let's see how many of them we can take out with us." She raised her voice, addressing her Weapons Officer. "Lieutenant Dawes, concentrated primary fire on their flagship—"

"Hold it," Tarlac interrupted. "There's something peculiar here. If they'd wanted us dead, they could've opened fire as soon as we out-transitioned. Since they didn't, let's see if we can find out just what they do want."

"Yes, sir," Willis said. "Hold your fire, Lieutenant, but be ready."

"Aye, Captain." Dawes was poised, tense, his fingers hovering almost in contact with his firing studs.

"What the—!" came an exclamation from the Communications Officer. "Sir, I'm getting a signal from them!"

"Put it on the screen," Willis ordered, inwardly amused. The idea of a Traiti who wanted to talk instead of fight ought to be astonishing—but not much could astonish an IBC's crew. They were too used to the out-of-the-ordinary events a Ranger seemed to attract to be astonished by much less than a divine manifestation. Even a Traiti appearing on a communicator screen didn't justify much more than Matthews' startlement.

While few humans could honestly claim to have seen a live Traiti in the nearly ten years the

Terran Empire had been at war with them, everyone knew what they looked like. They were big, the males at least averaging about 250 kilos, two meters tall—heavy, but not fat because of greater-than-human tissue density. They also had skin like soft but armor-tough gray leather, an ovoid head with bulges at top and sides set more horizontally on the short neck than a human's, with small eyes, slit nostrils, lipless shark-toothed mouth, and no external ears—but except for those and semi-retractile claws on their hands, the biologists insisted that Traiti were so much like humans it ought to indicate a common ancestor somewhere.

What did surprise the people on the Lindner's bridge was that the Traiti on the screen was smiling, exposing those shark-like teeth in an expression that might or might not mean pleasure but that certainly looked menacing.

When Arjen spoke, his voice provided another surprise. It was deep, not unexpectedly, but it was also soft, carrying an almost lilting intonation that made his Imperial English oddly attractive. "We no harm mean, Ship-Captain. I must to your superior speak."

He turned his attention to the green-clad Ranger, crossing his arms over his chest and inclining his head briefly in courtesy. "Ranger Esteban Tarlac. I you greetings bring, from the Supreme and First Speaker. I Fleet-Captain Arjen am."

Tarlac was surprised, but Rangers were adaptable; he returned the Traiti's salutation with a crossed-arm bow of his own and a quiet, "Fleet-Captain." Then he waited for Arjen's next move.

Arjen felt unwilling respect for the human who remained so calm and left the initiative to him. "The Supreme and First Speaker ask, that you them on Homeworld join. I their invitation extend, and transportation offer."

Tarlac appreciated the sharp irony of the so-courteous invitation, backed up by the outsized fleet. "They don't leave me much choice, do they?"

"They truly none you leave, Ranger," Arjen said regretfully. "I do not these tactics like, but I must my orders follow."

"Mmm. You have orders to destroy this ship if I refuse, don't you?"

Willis swung to face him. "Ranger, no! You can't, you're too—"

"Stop, you," Arjen interrupted. "This must his decision be. And he right is. If he does not with us come, my fleet will your ship destroy."

"Why do you want me badly enough to violate that signal?" Tarlac asked.

Even to the humans, unaccustomed to Traiti expressions, Arjen looked uncomfortable. "That had I hoped not to say, Ranger. The First Speaker says it necessary is, a Ranger to Homeworld bring. If I more say, it may your crew distress." He hesitated, then went on. "The Supreme's word you have, such a thing will never again done be."

"Damned if I know why," Tarlac said slowly, "but I think you mean that. All of it. Okay, I won't ask. You'll release the ship if I surrender?"

"We ask not that," Arjen replied, offended. "As our guest come, and your ship may freely go."

Willis interrupted their dialogue. "Fleet-Captain."

Arjen turned to her, inclining his head, and despite the discomfort that had led him to omit it before, addressed her with the formal honorific proper to an out-clan female. "I you hear, ka'naya Ship-Captain."

"Ranger Tarlac believes you, so I'm forced to. But I'll also have to report to the Emperor. Why do you want him?"

Arjen sighed deeply. Females in the human military disturbed him considerably, though he'd accustomed himself to the fact that they were included there—even in active combat—with no objection from the males who should be protecting them. And this one sounded like his Clan Mother. "Ka'naya Ship-Captain, please. Ask this of me not. It will you only hurt cause."

"Don't worry about that," Willis snapped. "You have your duty, I have mine. Tell me."

"As you wish, ka'naya." Arjen sighed again, this time to himself. She did sound much like Ka'ruchaya Noriy… He opened his shirt, exposing his massive chest. "See you these?" he asked, tracing the scars that ran from the base of his throat to just above his belt.

"I see them," Willis said grimly. Similar scars, found on maybe ten percent of recovered Traiti bodies, had Imperial experts puzzled. They had to be significant, and deliberately inflicted —they were far too regular to be accidental—but no one had been able to venture a reasonable guess at what they meant.

"I them in my Ordeal of Honor earned. Too much we have of Rangers heard; the truth we

must know. That can best through the Ordeal learned be. When we on Homeworld are, and a clan have found that will him adopt, the Supreme will ask that he it try. If Rangers truly as prisoners claim are, he will agree."

"That's not a condition of releasing the ship, then," Tarlac said.

"No, Ranger. The Ordeal must freely chosen be. Those who it try unwilling, die. We ask not certain death of you, but if you the Ordeal survive, the First Speaker says you will this war with honor end."

That possibility, Jean Willis knew, was something no Ranger could ignore. Unable to let him go without some objection, she spoke quietly enough that the comm pickups wouldn't transmit her words. "Anything that would leave scars like that on one of them… Steve, it's suicide, even if he says it isn't—or a trick so they can take you alive for interrogation, then blow the Lindner out of space. You don't have any reason to trust them."

"Trust doesn't have anything to do with it," Tarlac replied, just as quietly. "It's a case of trying to minimize the Empire's losses. I don't think it's suicide, but if it is, so what? I won't be any deader than if I refuse and his fleet destroys the Lindner. If he's being honest, you can get word back to Terra. If he's not, and they do try interrogation, well," Tarlac smiled slightly and shrugged, "I'll make sure I'm no use to them except as a warm body."

"Yeah." Willis knew what he meant, and her voice was bitter. Senior Imperials, or those in sensitive positions, could be given protection against questioning; she had it herself. If the Ranger chose, a code phrase in his own voice would turn him into a mental blank. It would do nothing to him physically, but it would wipe out, completely and permanently, every memory he had. He

would never remember so much as his name unless he was returned to Terra to have the tapes of his latest mindscan reimprinted.

"So it's not that much of a risk," Tarlac said. He raised his voice. "Very well, Fleet-Captain. I accept your invitation, and your Ordeal. When and how do you want me to transfer to your ship?"

"No reason for delay there is. Now come. A spacesuit use, your ship to leave. When you far enough from it are, you will onto this ship brought be. You need nothing extra bring; we will all your requirements supply."

"It'll take me about twenty minutes to get to an airlock and suit up."

"Understood, Ranger. I your arrival await."

With that, Arjen's image disappeared from the Lindner's viewscreen, replaced by a view of his fleet. Willis stared angrily at the englobing Traiti ships, running fingers through her short blonde hair in a gesture of frustration. "I still don't like this, Steve. I don't like it one little bit. Letting them get their hands on a Ranger…"

"I'm not too fond of it myself," Tarlac admitted, "but I can't see any way out. This was a beautiful trap. They've made sure the Empire loses a Ranger, one way or another, but if Arjen's being honest, at least it keeps a cruiser and crew. And you know as well as I do that if there's any chance of ending this slaughter, I have to take it." He grinned fleetingly. "I guess this is one way to find out what they're really like. While I'm suiting up, squirt-transmit a copy of the log to Terra, would you? The socio specs may be able to dig something useful out of what he said."

"Yes, sir." Willis stood, bleakly aware that the loss of an IBC would be minor next to the loss of a Ranger. If she could have saved him by sacrificing the Lindner, she wouldn't have hesitated. But, as usual, the Ranger was right; in combat there were bound to be heavy losses occasionally, and in such cases the best that could be done was to save what little was possible. "Ah … will you be going armed?"

Tarlac grinned, almost grimly. "It probably won't mean much, but yes. He called me a guest, and I'm going to act as if I believe him. That means full uniform, including gun." He took a last slow look around the bridge, then extended a hand to Willis. "Good luck, Jean. See you after the war."

"You too, Steve. It's been an honor captaining your ship." Willis' grip was tighter than usual, echoing the tension on the bridge, and it gave the Ranger the distinct impression she didn't expect to see him again. Honesty compelled him to admit to himself that he was less optimistic than he tried to appear.

"It won't be suicide, you know," he said, speaking now to the entire bridge crew. "As I said earlier, if they just wanted me dead, they'd have vaporized the Lindner as soon as we out-transitioned." He hesitated, remembering something. "Oh, yeah. Mister Olorun, how much did we miss their phony beacon by?"

"Twelve point nine kilometers, sir," the young officer replied, subdued.

Tarlac whistled softly in honest admiration, then dug into a beltpouch and flipped the Helmsman a five-credit piece. "Empress Lindner?"

"Yes, Ranger?" The ship's voice was feminine, slightly metallic.

"Log my commendation for Ensign Olorun's piloting, and have a shuttle ready to take me to Personnel Lock Three."

There was a barely-noticeable pause, then the ship-comp said, "Done, Ranger," as one of the three bridge doors slid open. Tarlac left the silent control room and entered the intraship shuttle that was waiting for him.

With the ship at General Quarters, the Ranger found the personnel lock deserted. That was fine with him. Suiting up was easier with help, but he didn't care for company just then; he began the ten-minute process of donning and checking his suit alone.

That the Traiti spoke Imperial English, even ungrammatically and with an accent, didn't surprise him. It was fairly common knowledge that the so-called Sharks took prisoners—although those were even less common than bodies—and nobody had doubted that the Traiti were smart enough to realize the value of learning their enemy's language.

That was an intelligence coup the Empire had been unable to match. Traiti too badly wounded to fight, or those hit by stun-beams and taken prisoner, never lived for long. Once they decided escape was impossible, those who were able to committed suicide, usually by clawing out their throats. Those who for one reason or another couldn't actively kill themselves simply lost the will to act and then to live, dying usually within a week of capture. The Empire had learned that they called themselves Traiti, little more.

Once he had his suit on, the Ranger fortunately didn't have to walk far. A standard spacesuit

was considerably less massive than a Marine's power armor, but it wasn't light, and it was clumsy in anything approaching a full standard gee. Clumping over to the lock, Tarlac cycled through.

He stood for a moment on the Lindner's hull. He enjoyed being EVA, especially near a planet, and the blue-white world off to his right was achingly reminiscent of Terra. Then he spotted a blinking white light "above" and to his left, on a Traiti ship. He released his boots' mag-field and pushed off toward the light, waiting until he was perhaps five meters off the hull before activating his thrustpac.

When he'd gone roughly a kilometer—a diameter out from the Lindner—a soft Traiti voice told him to cut power. He did, and the pressure at the small of his back died.

"You have control." He kept his voice impassive, as though he were giving the most routine of responses.

With that, he felt the pull of a tractor beam. At least, he thought, he'd aimed for the right ship; he was being drawn toward and into an open airlock. It was bigger than the lock he'd used on the Lindner, and different in detail, but it served the same function and had been designed by humanoids, so it couldn't be too different. When the tractor beam released him and the lock's outer door closed, radiant heaters came on.

His suit indicators showed rapidly-increasing air pressure. He
removed his helmet when it reached Terra-normal, but it didn't stop until the indicators showed air pressure, like the gravity, about ten percent greater than Terra's, with a fraction over a quarter oxygen. Like recycled air anywhere, it smelled flat.

Finally the inner door cycled open and Tarlac stepped through, to confront what he thought of as a commando squad. There were seven of them, with insignia indicating what Intelligence evaluations said should be six troopers and a junior officer. They were unarmored but otherwise in full battle gear, all standing in what the Ranger guessed might be the Traiti version of attention: relaxed yet alert, holding grounded blast rifles, right hands resting on dagger hilts. He had time to notice disruptors and shortswords on the commandos' belts in addition to the daggers, before the officer snapped him a salute that would have done credit to an Imperial Marine.

He was motionless for an instant in surprise, then he returned the salute as crisply as his spacesuit would allow. "Ranger Esteban Tarlac of the Terran Empire."

"Team-Leader Hovan of Clan Ch'kara. Need you help, that suit to remove?"

The squad remained alert, but gave no more hint of threat than before. Tarlac shrugged mentally. "I'd appreciate it, yes."

Hovan handed his blast-rifle to one of his squad members and approached Tarlac. He looked as massive as the Ranger expected, and was typically thickset, but he was even heavier and stronger than he looked. The strength became evident as Hovan helped Tarlac out of the spacesuit, for with Traiti assistance, the Ranger discovered, the cumbersome suit was almost easy to handle.

While he helped the human remove his spacesuit, Hovan did some studying of his own, wondering what made a Ranger so formidable. This Tarlac was even less impressive physically than the Terran combat troops he'd faced. He was no more than shoulder-high to Hovan, and so

slender he seemed almost frail. There was black hair on the man's head, and obvious facial differences, but the thin light-brown skin and total lack of claws or effective teeth were not impressive. What made this human so powerful?

There had to be something, he knew, some reason for the prisoners to hold Rangers in such high regard. Part of it had to be courage; he'd been told, while the man was en route, that he had already consented to the Ordeal, a decision nobody had expected him to make so quickly. There had even been some betting that he would refuse.

The plain, forest-green uniform revealed when the man's spacesuit was off was functional, Hovan noticed with approval, its only decoration the platinum star-in-circle badge on the man's left breast, the symbol of his rank. Best, though, was the fact that Tarlac was armed, showing he regarded them as true fighters.

That eased Hovan's mind. Ka'ruchaya Yarra had told him to judge the Terran he would meet, and if he found the man worthy, to offer adoption into Ch'kara. It would be an unprecedented honor for Hovan, as well as the Terran, if that happened; adoption was a Clan Mother's privilege, delegated sometimes to another female, never in Hovan's knowledge to a male.

He had told no one about his mission from Yarra. He still had trouble believing that he might bring a new member into the clan…

He'd had no difficulty being assigned as the Ranger's escort and teacher. Since humans were considered poor fighters, at least individually—and with a few outstanding exceptions—the job carried no status, and when he had indicated willingness to do it, the task became his. He'd been teased about it, not seriously; he'd proven himself often enough that nobody grudged him what

they thought would be easy duty.

Tarlac watched the Traiti stow the suit before turning to the commando squad with a claw-extending gesture, to say something in a tonal language that told the Ranger where the lilting Traiti version of Imperial English came from. If these people were singers, he thought, they'd be good. Singing didn't seem to fit in with what the Empire knew of the Traiti as ruthless, bloodthirsty killers, and language was hardly a reliable indicator of such things, of course—but still, it seemed incongruous. Tarlac hadn't thought about it much, but he supposed he would have expected their language to be as sharp as their teeth and claws.

The commandos fell in around the Ranger, and at another extended-claw gesture from Hovan, the whole group moved toward the Hermnaen's control central. Tarlac rather wished the Team-Leader would leave his claws retracted. He'd seen Traiti claws in action once, and didn't enjoy being reminded of the incident.

That had been on Ra after a ferocious ground battle, when the search team he was with found a seriously wounded Traiti. He'd looked so badly hurt that he couldn't move, so the team's medics didn't bother stunning him before beginning first aid. When the Ranger heard screams it was already too late; both medics were dead, one's throat torn out, the other's belly opened, and three Marines were down. By that time the Traiti was going for Tarlac, claws raking air toward the man's face.

Trained reflexes had taken over then. Rangers might not be experts in one-on-one combat, but they could make a creditable showing; Tarlac had done a tuck-and-roll, bringing his blaster out to save his own life by a fraction of a second as he fired pointblank, killing the Traiti.

Now here he was, aboard a Traiti warship, surrounded by a squad of the fearsome warriors and going voluntarily, if with no great enthusiasm, to an Ordeal that he suspected, despite Fleet-Captain Arjen's assurances, would cost him his life. Brooding on it would do no good, though, so Tarlac turned his attention to his surroundings.

The ship was surprisingly unwarlike, by Terran standards. Sky blue, as far as Tarlac was concerned, wasn't exactly a military color. And not even Sovereign-class cruisers, used during peacetime for such things as long-distance exploration and disaster aid, had passageways that doubled as art galleries. At the Traiti squad's pace, he didn't have time to examine the pictures, but he observed that all of them seemed well-done and the subject matter was varied: landscapes, battle and space scenes, figures. The Ranger couldn't help thinking of the commonest subjects as Madonnas, although they didn't seem religious. The ones with naked infants or nursing children made him uncomfortable; on Terra and even in most of the older colonies, such things weren't shown in public.

Despite his unease, Tarlac studied the pictures as well as he could during the walk. Unlikely as it seemed, he might somehow return to the Empire, and if that happened, any information he could bring back would be valuable to the socio and anthro specialists. That included information on Traiti art. He didn't have a specialist's training himself, but Ranger Linda Ellman, who'd taught him to appreciate art, had given him some understanding of how revealing artistic conventions could be. He knew enough to wonder at the prevalence of Madonnas—and at the total lack of abstract, impressionist, and other non-representational art forms.

By the time he got that far, they were at the bridge. So many control consoles grouped around what had to be a control central couldn't be anything else. Yet even here, the surroundings were

totally unwarlike—by Terran standards, Tarlac reminded himself. The sunny yellow color scheme was more noticeable now than it had been when he'd talked to them from the Lindner. It made the Traiti uniforms, both the ship crew's dark gray and the commandos' gray-green, seem even drabber by comparison.

Tarlac and Hovan were the only two to enter the bridge itself; the rest of the commandos, their guard duty done, left. Had it been an honor guard? Tarlac wondered. There had been nothing to indicate the contrary.

Arjen rose as the Ranger approached, inclining his head but not repeating the full formal salute. Then he gestured toward the large repeater screen, which showed Jean Willis, still wearing her grimmest face. Tarlac had a good idea of what she was thinking. The Traiti had the Ranger they wanted, for whatever their real purpose might be. It didn't make sense for them to keep their word, release a fully-operational enemy battle cruiser. But he couldn't have passed up even so remote a chance…

Arjen turned, to face Willis' image directly. "The condition met has been, Ship-Captain. You free to go now are."

Willis didn't look as if she believed it, but she gave orders to have Terra's coordinates fed into the helm. Then she searched the repeater screen, still wearing a troubled expression. "Ranger—?"

Tarlac moved to stand beside Arjen, the beginnings of hope allowing him to smile. "I'm all right, Captain. Your log'll show everything, including this, but I'll make it an order anyway. Return to Terra."

That didn't seem to make Willis any happier, but she couldn't argue with a Ranger's direct order. "Yes, sir." She turned to Olorun. "Execute transition."

Arjen showed no reaction to the Lindner's departure before he gave Tarlac his full attention. "To this ship welcome be, Ranger. You have Team-Leader Hovan met; he has said, he will you escort and teach. If you to him object, I will another assign."

Tarlac glanced up at the apparently impassive commando beside him, then looked back at Arjen. He could hardly dislike the Team-Leader he'd barely met. "I don't object. I'd be honored." It wouldn't hurt to be polite, especially since it was beginning to look as if he were actually what Arjen had called him, a guest. For no reason he could name, he inclined his head and touched fingertips to his brow.

Hovan suppressed a gasp of astonishment and heard some around the bridge that weren't suppressed. How could a Terran know to accept hospitality in the proper way? Unless the Lords… No, such a thing was far too unimportant for the Lords to concern themselves with. Arjen's hands covered the Ranger's briefly in response to the gesture, and the moment was over.

It had to be a fortunate coincidence, not important but a demonstration of the Terran's willingness to take his part in Traiti life. Hovan thought about the adoption, and quickly decided that he shouldn't offer it so soon. Two things, significant as they might be, weren't enough to prove this human worthy of a clan as old and honored as Ch'kara. He needed more, especially if the Ranger was to join as a candidate for the Ordeal of Honor. Hovan had been given a solemn responsibility for the clan's choice; he had to be certain he was right when he made his decision. And he had the time for that; Homeworld was more than a tenday away.

"If you will then me excuse," Arjen said formally, "I still much to do have. I the freedom of the ship you give."

"Thank you." There was no more doubt in Tarlac's mind that he was a guest. He still had his gun and was, it seemed, to be allowed to roam freely. He turned to his escort. "I'm at your disposal, Team-Leader. What do we do now?"

"It past my normal duty-time is, and I hungry am," was the reply. "I food need, and sleep. If you something else prefer, one of my men some English speaks; he can as temporary escort for you act."

Tarlac's internal clock said it was mid-afternoon, but this was as good a time as any to start changing his diurnal rhythms. "That's not necessary, Team-Leader."

"Then come," Hovan said, and Traiti and human left the bridge.

Hovan's long strides didn't give Tarlac much time to study art on the way to the dining area, but he saw more than he had earlier, since he was no longer surrounded by bodies. The new data didn't change his initial impression, but he had already started to adapt to the Madonna pictures that'd disturbed him. That was no real surprise; spacers in general were more adaptable than ground-pounders—they had to be—and Rangers excelled at that, as at almost everything. Given the need and a little time, he could adapt to any humanly-conceivable circumstances . . . though of course some things took longer than others.

So far, Tarlac was finding nothing too difficult in the Traiti pattern. He suspected that he might, when he got deeper into their culture. This business of adoption, for instance—why should

he have to join a clan to take their Ordeal?

And why wait to find out, or anyway to learn whether he could find out? Hovan was supposed to be his teacher in such matters. As they passed pictures and corridor intersections and doors labeled in the angular Traiti script, Tarlac spoke. "The Fleet-Captain says I'll have to be a member of one of your clans to take the Ordeal. Can you tell me why?"

"Because parts of the Ordeal in-clan matters are, not with out-clan or clanless discussed. I can no more of that say."

"Okay. I suppose I'll find out when the time comes." That seemed to describe a lot of today's experiences, Tarlac thought, then he decided not to worry about it. It was easier to cope with situations as they arose, in a case like this.

They arrived at a meal hall, and the smell was enough to make Tarlac hungry. It operated cafeteria-style; Tarlac, unfamiliar with any of the food, copied Hovan's choices, and ended up with more than he could possibly eat. The portions, from salad to stew and a beverage that looked like milk, were sized to fuel a body mass more than three times his. Still, the food was good, if unfamiliar, and he surprised himself by finishing almost half.

He leaned back with a sigh of repletion, returning Hovan's quick smile as the other continued eating. There was little conversation to hear over the sound of eating utensils, knives and short-tined spoons that doubled as forks. Clearly, eating was serious business for these people. At least he didn't have to worry about the food; bio-studies had shown that Traiti and humans had the same basic nutritional requirements and limitations. No Traiti food should poison him.

Finally Hovan pushed back his tray, his meal finished. "Ranger Esteban Tarlac. We will much together be; object you if we not formal are? Out-clan it not usual is, names to use instead of titles, but I think it would fitting be."

Tarlac nodded; under the circumstances, it did seem appropriate. "I'm called Steve, then, Hovan. That's the short form of my given name."

"Steve. A name that much of strength bears, from the sound." Steve of Clan Ch'kara. Yes, Hovan thought, it did sound fitting, and it was another good sign that the man allowed him that liberty. There was no denying a Ranger's status among humans. It might take the Ordeal to find out whether an individual Ranger was worthy of honor from the Traiti, but prisoners had made it more than clear that Rangers were direct representatives of the Terran Sovereign. They went anywhere they were needed, to tackle crises nobody else was capable of handling. Sometimes, it was said, the mere threat of a Ranger's intervention made actual intervention unnecessary. And it was they, when the need arose, who selected the Sovereigns—so far, always another Ranger. There was more, stories that made Rangers seem like Lords. Hovan didn't believe those, for Steve had used a spacesuit to transfer to the Hermnaen; he hadn't breathed vacuum. But even so, to name-call such a one must be as great a privilege as the task Yarra had given him. "Do many you so call?"

"Hmm? Oh. No, not many." Tarlac seldom thought about it, and was surprised at the brevity of the list. "The captain of my cruiser, the Emperor, other Rangers, my mother … that's about it." He frowned briefly. "It'd be nice to have more, but the job doesn't allow it. A Ranger's as much a symbol as a person. It's mostly a damn good life … but sometimes it gets lonely. I think I'm almost looking forward to being adopted, odd as that may seem at my age." Then he shrugged.

"Sorry, Hovan. I didn't mean to go crying on your shoulder. Don't know why I did."

Hovan rose, motioning Steve to follow. He had never heard of "crying on your shoulder," but could guess from context what the man meant, and thought it best not to go into something so personal, at least while Steve was out-clan. "Come. I will you our sleep-room show, while it still early is."

Tarlac went along, surprised at his self-revelation. He'd seldom mentioned the occasional loneliness before, even to the other Rangers, who shared it. It didn't fit the image. He grinned sardonically for a second. Image. Hah. Thanks to the image, not even newsies pushed a Ranger too hard, and nobody else pushed at all. Nobody with any brains, at least.

Hovan interrupted his brooding. "What can you of the Empire and Rangers say? I wish not to intrude or offend, but I curious am."

Tarlac gave that a moment's thought, and found the answer an easy one. "Quite a bit, as a matter of fact. I'll tell you anything you want to know, except classified military information. Your High Command must know as well as I do how this war's gone up to now."

"Telling us even that would little difference make," Hovan said quietly. "You know not how close you to victory are. In less than another year, there will no more Traiti be."

The Ranger stopped where he was, deeply shocked. "Hovan, what are you saying? The Empire isn't out to commit genocide! We don't kill non-combatants on purpose!"

"No such thing as noncombatants is. When we to Homeworld retreat, we no other place to go

will have. All will fighters be, except the very youngest. It happened so, in the clan wars nearly four thousand years ago."

Hovan's calm words meant the Empire was in the process of exterminating an entire intelligent race, a crime more monstrous than any recorded in the history of all three Imperial races combined. And the Empire didn't even know it! The Ranger would have cursed, but not even a space-scout's inventive vocabulary could express his feelings.

Not really expecting an affirmative answer, Tarlac asked, "Can they—the women and children, anyway—can any of them surrender?"

"No word for that in Language is," Hovan said. "We the concept from humans learned. They cannot."

And that was a certain indicator in any language. Lacking the word, it lacked the concept, and so did the people who spoke it. It was true that no Traiti had surrendered during the entire course of the war, and there had been speculation about the reason; the hypothesis that Traiti were incapable of it had gained some favor over the years.

Tarlac wasn't glad to find it was right. That meant that even more than the chance of peace rode on his survival of this Ordeal. Damn! Tarlac thought the word with vehement intensity, but didn't say it aloud. It wasn't fair! A race's extinction should not depend on one man, especially one who wasn't at all sure of his own ability to survive!

Clearly, he could no longer afford such doubts. So, think of something else for now.

Okay. He'd already begun to see how complex the Traiti were, much more so than the Empire suspected. The Empire's knowledge was limited to these people's savage ferocity—or what seemed like savage ferocity. The war had exploded suddenly and simply: a scoutship exploring about 150 parsecs coreward from Irschcha had fallen silent. A rescue ship sent to check on the scout had had time to describe its attackers before it was destroyed as well. The third ship was the Emperor Chang, a battle cruiser which survived its Traiti attack and brought word that, like it or not, the Empire was at war with an unreasoning enemy. Traiti hostility was long proven, but Tarlac could no longer believe it was unreasoning.

"Hovan—why did your people attack that first scout, ten years ago? I feel certain it didn't give any deliberate provocation."

"I cannot fully say, since I have not the tapes seen. We knew not that its intention peaceful was. You should the Supreme ask, when you him see. But this much all know: an alien ship suddenly over a new-landed homeship was, a possible danger to females and younglings. It responded not to challenge, and visual contact obscene horror showed." Claws flickered briefly on one hand, then Hovan continued. "Our guard-ship the only way it could reacted. That we since learned a mistake was, but too late."

"Most of that I understand, I think, but I'll take your advice and ask to see the tapes." No wonder the Traiti had acted as they had. Their hyperdrive at the time had been slow to transition; when an Imperial ship appeared within seconds, it was only natural that they'd interpret it as a threat. And scoutships were armed—had to be—so that even if the ship hadn't tried to attack, it was obviously not harmless. The Traiti had challenged instead of firing instantly at the invader, and the challenge, not understood, had been ignored. So the colony's guard-ship acted. "Damn!

What a waste! One misunderstanding led to— Oh, hell!" Tarlac stared at the deck, scarcely aware of his surroundings.

When he looked up, Hovan's green eyes were appraising him. "If that you disturbs, let it not. They would have anyway fired, I think."

Tarlac recalled the unexplained factor. "The obscene horror. What was that? What could be so bad it'd cause that kind of a reaction?"

"Females on a ship that might have into battle gone. No race insane enough to that allow…" Hovan shook his head. "We have since learned that you so many females have that it not insane for you is, but it still unacceptable to most of us is. For us, a female in unnecessary danger to place, the death penalty earns. One who actual harm on a female inflicts, unless in self-defense, his clan full dishonor brings. That one also dies, in public at his Clan Mother's claws, the clan's honor to restore. Then he buried is, not to the Lords presented. See you now?"

That was quite a taboo, Tarlac thought, taken aback, but why—? He was beginning to put things together: paintings of Madonnas, humans having "so many" females… "How much of your race is female?"

"One in four."

Oh. Dear. God.

The Imperial ship had been a threat to Traiti women and children. It had ignored a challenge, and the seeming invaders had shown a complete disregard for even their own females' safety.

With that gender ratio, protection of females and young had to be the prime Traiti racial imperative. The crew of that Imperial scout might or might not have violated first-contact procedure—he'd find out when he saw the tape Hovan had mentioned—but it was certain they'd triggered an instinct-level reaction.

They had come to the sleeproom by the time the Ranger reached that point in his thoughts. The compartment was wider than it was deep, with lockers along the bulkheads to either side of the entry door. There were two other doors on the left, and the right wall held what looked like oversized square pigeon-holes—but it was the mural on the long wall opposite the entrance that captured Tarlac's attention.

It was a mountain scene, one that might have been of a remote spot on Terra except for details of the foreground forest. And it was beautiful. Tarlac found himself relaxing, and smiled.

"You our Homeworld like?"

"It's … like my home, the way it was when I was a boy. We had a house near a lake like that. It could only be reached by grav-hopper. We didn't have much company, but I didn't miss it; I had the lake, the woods, the animals…" For the first time since he'd left for the Academy, Tarlac felt a twinge of homesickness. He wondered why, briefly, before dismissing it. It had to be the mural; Linda had said that art could evoke emotion even between cultures.

"You alone grew up? No kin had?" Hovan sounded faintly shocked.

"My parents, of course, and family get-togethers every couple of years. We weren't really close; the family was too big for that. Uncle Martin and Aunt Gisele alone had ten kids." Tarlac

shook his head, grinning. "What a mob!"

"Kids?"

It seemed Hovan's vocabulary had a blank spot; Tarlac tried again. "Children. Younglings."

"Ten … younglings?" Hovan's voice was little more than a whisper, sounding awed. He turned away abruptly, toward the right-side-wall pigeon-holes. Tarlac followed, accepting the bundle he was handed, then he followed his guide back to unroll the bundle on the floor. It proved to be a Traiti-sized bedroll with a pillow and a flocked-foam blanket.

Then Hovan showed him to a locker, and Tarlac found Arjen's comment that his needs would be supplied was exactly accurate. The locker held Terran-style soap, comb, toothbrush, underwear—everything, it seemed, except uniforms.

"Thanks. You people are thorough."

"We try. I only glad am, that you have honor shown. I would not have it pleasant found, an unworthy one to guide."

The Ranger didn't know what to say to what sounded like praise, or at least like approval, from a Traiti. He settled for, "Thanks again. I try, too." Then he quickly changed the subject. "Uh, Hovan, I don't want to be offensive, but I think it might be a good idea if you show me where the sanitary facilities are."

"That next on the tour was," Hovan said, smiling.

After taking care of immediate necessities, the Ranger decided he could use a bath. He left his gun and equipment belt in the locker, picked out clean underwear, and started toward the bathing room door in the left wall.

Hovan, turning from a nearby locker, stopped him. "Why need you those?"

"To sleep in," Tarlac said, surprised. The Traiti had forgotten one thing; they hadn't thought to salvage pajamas from the Terran supplies.

"You need them not. The air warm is, and you a blanket have."

Uh-oh, Tarlac thought. That must mean the Traiti slept nude, which was definitely not a Terran custom. He was by no means certain he could adjust that far that quickly.

Hovan sensed the man's unease, remembering stories of human prisoners' behavior. "If you more comfortable that way are, those wear." But he was disappointed. Until now, Steve had been doing quite well.

Tarlac hesitated, thinking, then returned the small bundle of clothing to his locker. "I don't think so. Since it seems I'll be living with you people for quite a while, I might as well get used to it as soon as I can."

He walked hurriedly through the bathing room door, feeling himself blush. This wouldn't be quite so easy. He'd never been nude in public; it was indecent. Then he hesitated, realizing that he wasn't being completely accurate: it was indecent only by current standards, and even at that, not everywhere. Although he'd never visited any, he knew the Empire held worlds where nudity was

unremarkable. That was obviously the case here, and he didn't have any choice, so he'd have to make the best of it.

He located the cleaner and undressed, putting his uniform and underclothes in, and turned the unit on. Then he picked one of the translucent shower stalls, experimented with the unfamiliar controls, and began soaping himself.

By the time he was clean and, he hoped, no longer blushing, there were Traiti in the stalls to either side of him, gray bodies seen dimly through the shower walls and an occasional bit of melodic speech sounding over the noise of running water. Bracing himself, he left the scanty concealment of the stall and picked up a towel off the stack he'd spotted earlier. Drying himself didn't take nearly long enough, but he forced himself to stop when he was done, and walked into the sleeproom.

To his relief, no one was there, though another dozen mats unrolled on the floor were evidence there soon would be. Hovan joined him seconds later, still damp, and gave Tarlac a quick, searching glance. "Be easy, Steve," he said. "You will none offend, you so little body hair have. There nothing wrong with you seems."

Tarlac stared at him in disbeief, then couldn't keep from grinning. "None offend … Body hair!" Embarrassment dissolved into helpless laughter, subsiding only when the Ranger had collapsed onto his sleeping mat. "That did it, Hovan," he finally managed to say. "Nudity's okay, but not body hair—Whew!"

He stood, shaking his head and smiling, no longer disturbed by his own state of undress or by the equally bare Traiti now moving about the room. They seemed more impressive this way than

when clothed, unlike most humans—himself, Tarlac admitted wryly, included. He felt pale in contrast with their rich, even coloring. And while he was in good shape, he was nowhere near as muscular as the beings around him. They made him feel out of place in a half-remembered way, almost like … what? Yes, that was it. Like a kid.

Well, that didn't really matter. Rangers weren't picked for their bodies. The primary criteria were mental: among other things were intelligence, imagination, an adaptable but stable mind, a generalist's variety of knowledge, intense loyalty to the Empire … and no close personal ties.

Hovan returned the man's smile, pleased. From what he had heard of
human prisoners, he'd guessed that sidetracking Steve's train of thought might help; it seemed to have worked. He waved a hand, indicating the others in the room. "You have part of my team seen. Now that you relaxed are, may I a favor ask?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"My men have humans fought and killed, but have never any truly met. If you willing are, they would like to you examine, and then questions ask. But you out-clan to all of us are; if you wish it not, none will offended be."

"I don't see why I shouldn't do it, as long as it works both ways. I'd like to examine a live Traiti as much as they'd like to examine a live human."

"That reasonable is. I willing am, to your subject be." Hovan called his men over, conveying Steve's assent, then stood relaxed. "I ready am."

Tarlac had seen Traiti corpses, and read medical and autopsy reports, so he was familiar with the sleek, almost hairless bodies. But there was a tremendous difference between that rather abstract understanding and the immediacy of a living, vital warrior towering over him. It was only then that he realized Hovan was one of the scarred ones—his embarrassment must have kept him from noticing earlier. Not sure whether it might give offense, he reached hesitantly to touch the scars. They were darker than the surrounding skin, but the texture was only a little bit rougher. He was surprised at the supple softness and warmth of skin he knew to be tough as leather armor. Had he really been expecting the human-dubbed "Sharks" to be literally cold-blooded?

That private fallacy laid to rest, he stepped back, wondering what to expect. "Okay, your turn."

Hovan didn't have to translate that; his men got the idea and crowded around the Ranger. He didn't take part himself because he'd learned what he needed to know while the man was examining him. Just the fingertips lightly touching his scars had been more than enough to confirm his earlier impression. The man's every action, from coming aboard armed to allowing his alien hosts to satisfy their curiosity, showed the courage and self-assurance of one whose sense of honor was so much a part of him that he felt no need to stand on ceremony. The brief physical touch had even given him the feeling of belonging shared by n'ruhar—what English inadequately referred to as clanmates.

Steve was worthy of Ch'kara; Hovan was convinced of that. And the sense of belonging in Steve's touch made it almost certain he would accept the offer. Hovan told himself ruefully that he shouldn't have entertained even the small doubts he'd had of Ka'ruchaya Yarra's wisdom. It

had seemed impossible that an alien could truly be a ruhar, and Steve was undoubtedly an alien, even though he wasn't frightened, as so many humans seemed to be, by the sheer size of beings so alien to them. Yet the clan-feeling was definitely there—how had Yarra guessed?

Hovan dismissed that unseemly question. She was Ka'ruchaya of Ch'kara, not he; such things were the concern of Clan Mothers and Speakers, not of fighters. He obeyed in this as they would obey him in his field— though he prayed the need would never arise for them to defend Ch'kara as fighters.

But he could still feel wonderment at being empowered to perform the adoption. Males shared in the creation of life, but it was females who actually brought it forth into the clan, by birth or adoption. In the case of adoption, the new ruhar should be brought into the gathering hall, with as many of the clan as possible attending. Steve wouldn't have that, or even a close approximation, until Homeworld; there weren't enough of Ch'kara in the Fleet. But he would have the best Hovan could manage, next wake-time.

Tarlac was still being examined by curious but carefully gentle commandos. It wasn't embarrassing; his own laughter had cured that problem, at least here. Being poked and prodded wasn't as bad as he'd thought it would be, even as closely as he was being checked out. Naturally enough, his examiners were paying closest attention to the points where the two races differed most: head, hands, and skin. He was willing to swear, for instance, that a dentist couldn't have gone into more detail over his teeth.

But finally that was over and it was question time. Tarlac seated himself cross-legged on his sleeping mat, where Hovan promptly joined him to translate for the others. Then the questioning started, hesitantly at first, not touching on anything too significant until Tarlac's quiet manner and

responsive answers put the commandos at ease. When that happened, the questions became more searching.

"Do humans honor have?" one asked.

"I'm not really sure just how you use the term," Tarlac said slowly, "so I'll have to go by the human ideal. We have a few cultures, mostly warrior ones like the Sandeman and Tharn, that are honor-directed, but in the rest of the Empire I'd have to say most people don't. Not the way warrior races define it, anyway, and I've got a hunch you're more like them, at least in that way, than you're like the rest of the Empire. Outside of the warrior cultures, it's the military that thinks most about honor, though not even all of them care; to a lot of civilians…" The Ranger hesitated, frowning. "Well, honor and profit just don't seem to mix."

"You different are," another said. "Why?"

Tarlac shrugged. "I don't quite know. Maybe because I've always been something of an idealist." He grinned. "Though I was called a lot of other things before I was recruited."

"All Rangers like you are, in that?"

"Idealists? Yes, or they wouldn't be Rangers."

"Is it true there female Rangers are?"

"Sure. Right now, three of them. We can't afford to discriminate, not for any job. Local affairs aren't an Imperial concern, so some do things differently, but the Empire itself doesn't judge

anything but what you can do. Especially if the comps and Sovereign agree that you've got what it takes to be a Ranger."

That got a murmur of some sort, and from the tone Tarlac guessed it was disapproval. Hovan didn't translate; instead, he said something that silenced them.

"It's okay, Hovan," Tarlac said, not offended but curious. "What is it?"

"They say that insane is. Not only that you females in such danger place, but that you machines use, your best to choose. I them told, there so many humans are, you no choice have."

Tarlac nodded, surprised. "Right! Well, mostly. The comps don't exactly choose; they just eliminate the ones who don't measure up to the specs. Which, I admit, doesn't leave many. Then the Sovereign checks the comp's choices, and sends a Ranger to invite the ones @ chooses. After that, only about a quarter of those who're asked to join, refuse." His expression sobered. "I almost did refuse, almost decided to go into the Navy instead of taking Linda's offer. I'm glad I didn't. I'd've had more security, but a lot less challenge."

"Or danger?" Hovan was smiling.

"Or danger," Tarlac agreed.

Hovan's translation of that got a discussion going. The Ranger remained silent, listening to the commandos and enjoying the musical sounds of their speech. He felt oddly at ease, sitting open and relaxed in the group of beings whose appearance was so sharklike; he was well aware that in a similar situation with a human enemy, he would have been anything but at ease. When

Hovan turned back to him and started to speak, Tarlac held up his hand. "About time for one of my questions, isn't it?"

"Ask."

"There's something I don't understand. Granted, I'm here as Fleet-Captain Arjen's guest, and I've agreed to take the Ordeal. But I'm still your enemy. If one of you had come to us, 'persuaded' the way I was, at the very least you'd have been disarmed and guarded, instead of being given the freedom of the ship. For all you know, I could be planning some kind of sabotage."

Hovan smiled. "That you such a possibility raise, shows you would not it do."

"That's not always a safe assumption to make," Tarlac said. "In this case it is, yes, and I'd like to think it always was—but I've already told you most humans don't have a sense of honor like yours. A lot of people would bring up that sort of objection just to lull suspicion."

"So much we have from prisoners learned," Hovan agreed. "But we have also learned, from the tiny ferocious ones who themselves Sandemans call, that Rangers only devious are when there no other choice is. And you no reason for deception have."

"More precisely, we'll be misleading when it's in the Empire's interest—which isn't often. And even then, we keep it to the absolute minimum; people have to know that when one of us makes a definite statement, it's binding." Interesting, Tarlac thought, that the beings humans thought of as merciless killers considered the Sandemans ferocious. On the other hand, there was no way he'd care to face a battleprepped Sandeman warrior himself, in anything less than shielded power armor… "Not to mention which, it's both easier and safer to be direct, especially with

warriors. Like them, for instance."

"They much like us are," Hovan said, smiling again. "If you do peace bring, I think we and they will good friends become."

Tarlac had a sudden mental picture of a Traiti trading war stories and combat techniques with one of the small dark-skinned blonds—and it seemed more an inevitable picture than an odd one. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you did," he agreed. "But you still haven't told me why I'm being so well treated."

"That simple is. You to us armed came, and you have honor shown; we could no less honor show."

There was no way Tarlac could reply to that. He had already begun to believe that he could trust these people's honor where he'd be reluctant to trust a human's obedience to law. Hovan's calm statement only added to that conviction.

Another Traiti indicated that he had a question. Hovan listened, gestured sharply, and spoke, then turned to the Ranger. "This more personal is than the other questions. He asks if you have children fathered."

"I don't mind; no, I haven't." Of course, Tarlac thought. With that sex ratio, parenthood could easily be a sensitive subject for males. "I'm not married, and even if I were, I don't think I'd… Well, anyway, having children when I'm on Terra so little wouldn't be fair to them. Being a Ranger's child wouldn't make up for having a father—or mother—who's gone all the time. That's partly why none of us has a family."

There was a soft murmur, this time sounding sympathetic, and the next question was on an entirely different subject. "The furred four-footers with two tongues—what purpose serve they?"

"Cloudcats? You must have captured some, yeah." Ondrian hadn't been involved in any of the fighting, but cloudcats roamed all through the Empire. "They don't serve a purpose. Part of their bargain for certain human rights on their planet, Ondrian, was their right to travel on Imperial Navy ships any time. I suppose you could call them observers."

"They intelligent are?"

Tarlac could hear astonishment even in the original questioner's voice. "Of course. Didn't anyone tell you?" Then he realized they probably hadn't asked. The first Ondrian colonists had thought the cloudcats unintelligent predators; why shouldn't the Traiti have assumed the same thing, or maybe decided they were pets? "Yes, they're intelligent. They can't talk; they use their tongues for gestural communication, and to handle things. They're outstanding artists, too." If some of his speculations were correct, that might mean more to the Traiti than to many humans.

Hovan translated, then turned to the human. "We some as captives took and caged. We hurt them not, yet have them as animals treated. We must that change, or dishonor suffer. Can we with them communicate?"

"Most English understand—" Tarlac broke off. "Oh, hell, I'm starting to adapt to your speech patterns. I'm not trying to make fun of you. If I've offended, I'm sorry."

"There no offense is," Hovan said calmly. "Go on."

"Okay. Most of them understand English, and can indicate yes and no. That's about all you can expect unless one of your human or Irschchan prisoners is familiar with tongue-talk." Tarlac grinned. "We made that mistake too. We lost some time by it, but it wasn't a disaster. They may even have picked up some of your language by now. They're fast learners."

After a few quick words from Hovan, one of his men rose, dressed, and left. Tarlac gathered he was going to tell someone with more authority about the cloudcats immediately, and Hovan confirmed it.

There wasn't much talk after that, the serious questions seeming to have run out, and in the shuffle that followed of Traiti settling into their bedrolls for the night, Tarlac spent a moment considering his surprise at their action. The Traiti hadn't waited a night or even an hour to correct something which surely was not an urgent mistreatment. The cloudcats were comfortable, Hovan said, even if they were confined; the human prisoners were almost certainly confined somehow, too. Merely treating intelligent beings as nonsapient was a cause for dishonor, it seemed, which spoke well of Traiti honor. True, the dishonor might be in underestimating a possible enemy—but that didn't quite seem to fit, somehow.

When the messenger returned and had taken his place in the sleeping room, Hovan touched a control on the bulkhead to darken the room. Then he said a couple of words, and all but Tarlac joined him in what the Ranger thought could be a prayer, a chant, or a song. Whatever it was, he liked it; the sounds in the musical Traiti language evoked peace. When it was over, the room grew quiet.

By Tarlac's inner clock, though, it was still too early to sleep. And so much had happened that he wasn't sure he could have slept if it were late for him instead. So he lay there in the dark

silence, hands linked behind his head, and let his thoughts wander.

He had plenty to think about, and not enough solid facts to make any conclusions reliable. Most of what he'd learned only served to raise further questions. The Ordeal was the key to the whole thing; Fleet-Captain Arjen had said as much. And it was dangerous, Arjen made no secret of that—but how dangerous? Aside from the fact that it left scars and wasn't universal, he knew little about it. Had they tested any other humans before deciding to try a Ranger? If so, what had happened? He had no way of knowing.

Then there was the evident contrast between battle-readiness in men and ship, and the obvious concern for mental comfort in the ship's decoration. Being a generalist, not a xenopsych, Tarlac could only wonder about it. Still, morale was as vital as guns, and he had to admit that the shipboard art gallery was no more unlikely than the forested recreation areas on the Sovereign-class cruisers. It was less space-consuming, as well, though to a ship the size of a battle cruiser that wasn't really significant. On the other hand, despite their designation, IBCs weren't purely battle craft, and were often sent on long-haul non-combat missions. This ship and the others in the Traiti fleet, from what he'd seen, were warships, pure and simple. If nothing else, they just didn't have the size to be either multi-purpose or long-duration.

That made him think. Unless the Traiti were a lot more fragile psychologically than any human thought, such concern with amenities on a warship was out of character. They might be more alien than other evidence indicated—or a lot more aesthetic. He couldn't believe they were all that fragile psychologically, and his current close contact was showing less, rather than more, underlying alienness. That left the last possibility, that these ferocious fighters were also artists.

If there were any parallels at all with Terra, that could be true. History showed plenty of

military men, on any side in any war, who had expressed themselves through art. Tarlac could think of several offhand, just from the last World War: Hirohito, poet; Mauldin, cartoonist; Eisenhower and Churchill, both painters; and Hitler, architect. It seemed plausible that art was as important here in everyday surroundings as it seemed; he would use that as a working hypothesis unless he found evidence to the contrary.

Then there were the few hints he had about family life. It was important, that was obvious, and he couldn't help speculating, despite almost total lack of data, on what it was like. There was strong clan structure, yes, but "clan" covered a lot of territory. With the low proportion of women and the touchiness about parenthood, the setup might be like the old Arabian sheikdoms, with women belonging to the dominant males and kept in a kind of protective custody, used as breeding machines.

He didn't like that picture, though he knew a lot of human men would find it an attractive fantasy. Still, under the circumstances, it seemed like a reasonable assumption.

Then he rolled over, pulling the blanket up over his shoulders, as his thoughts went back to his earlier misgivings. Dammit, he didn't want to brood about that! Sure, bringing peace would be worth his life; plenty of others had paid that price, without the half-promise he had. He'd have to follow them into final nothingness eventually, and he'd go without protest if he knew it would mean the end of this ten-year slaughter—but it wouldn't.

He couldn't die, not if he was to bring peace. He had to live, to survive an Ordeal that sometimes killed beings as tenacious of life as the sharks they resembled. It helped, knowing that they wanted him to succeed—and why shouldn't they? It was their race's survival that was at stake, not humanity's.

If it was possible, he promised himself, he'd do it. He had a brief vision of himself at a Grand Audience afterward, approaching the Emperor accompanied by several shadowy Traiti. He was in full formal uniform, his dress cloak brushing the carpet—but his shirt was open, neatly arranged to show the four scars down his chest, and he let himself smile at the image. Wouldn't the newsies and protocol perfectionists be upset!

But that was enough of that; he really should try to rest. It had been a rough day, a strain on even a Ranger's ability to adapt. Stretched out in the dark, surrounded by the soft rhythms of breathing and the somehow reassuring smell of clean bodies, Tarlac felt his tension ease. Only then did he realize just how much the strain had fatigued him, and it wasn't long before his own breathing joined the comfortable pattern of his sleeping companions'.

Chapter II

Hovan touched the light control, then rolled over on his mat and looked at the human in the growing wake-light. Steve was still asleep, curled on his side, half in and half out of the blanket, and he looked incredibly vulnerable. There were scars on the man's back, Hovan noted; studying them, he decided they had been deliberately inflicted, probably by some sort of lash. Perhaps that meant the Ranger was tougher than he looked, and had a better chance in the Ordeal than was generally believed. Hovan hoped so, since he found himself beginning to like the frail-seeming human who would soon be his ruhar.

He was glad, now, that he had never voiced his private doubts about Ka'ruchaya Yarra's decision to offer adoption to an alien and enemy. He did wonder again why she had thought a human would be suitable, but she had left him no choice if he found the man worthy; to disobey her was unthinkable.

Apparently either his scrutiny or the wake-light had become too intense. Steve was beginning to stir, his eyes opening as he rolled over.

It was the light that had awakened Tarlac, to see Hovan smiling at him. He smiled back. Thin as his mat was, it was as comfortable as the bed in his apartment at the Imperial Palace in Antarctica; he'd slept well. "Morning, Hovan."

The Traiti was puzzled. "Yes, for this part of the crew."

"It's a greeting," Tarlac explained as he rose. "It doesn't mean too much any more; it's just a habit."

"I understand." Hovan was smiling again, also up now. So were the rest of the room's occupants, busy taking uniforms and gear from their lockers. Tarlac retrieved his own uniform from the cleaner in the bathing room and dressed, then returned to the sleeping room to put on his gun-and-equipment belt.

Rather to his surprise, he found the room empty except for Hovan, whose uniform shirt was folded open to expose his Honor scars. That, the Ranger already knew, wasn't standard. Gesturing, he asked, "What's up?"

Hovan motioned him to follow and led the way silently until they were on their way to the meal hall. At last, he decided how to phrase what he had to say. "After first-meal, I clan business have." He indicated the open shirt. "This shows that I with my clan status act, not with this rank." He tapped the white tabs on his collar. "This you concerns, Steve. Some clan must you adopt, and I Ch'kara offer. It not the biggest clan is, or richest, but never has it dishonored been. You will as one of us treated be, if you Ch'kara choose, and I will as your Ordeal sponsor stand."

Tarlac stopped, looking up at the serious gray face. He had the same feeling of sudden unreality he'd had when Linda extended His Majesty's invitation to join the Rangers. Adoption was a necessary prelude to the Ordeal, he knew that, but he hadn't expected it until they reached Homeworld. Yet he had no doubt that Hovan's offer was serious, and that it was as deeply significant to Hovan as it was to himself.

Looking directly into the Traiti's clear green eyes, Tarlac said, "If it won't require me to violate my oath to the Empire, I'll join Ch'kara gladly. And I'd be proud to have you as my sponsor."

"The adoption you to the clan binds, not to the military. None would you ask, your oath to break." Hovan touched the man's shoulder. "But now come. It not good is, first-meal to miss." They moved on toward the meal hall.

As before, Tarlac didn't recognize any of the plentiful food. There were different kinds of meat and two kinds of fruit, one pink and one a brilliant scarlet, all of it good. When they finished, Hovan guided Tarlac to the bridge.

One of the deck officers noticed them as they entered, and called Arjen's and Exvani's

attention to the human and the open-shirted Traiti. Both Captains stood, bowing.

Tarlac was astonished at the sudden apparent reversal of rank. Granted, the Imperial military had officers whose civil rank was far higher than their military one—Life Duke/Marine Captain David Scanlon, for example—but in the Empire, it wasn't possible to go from one system to the other at will. Things had to be different here, if clan business and clan status took priority over defense and on-duty military rank. Watch and learn…

Hovan returned the two officers' bows, speaking English for Steve's benefit. "I word from Ch'kara's Mother bear, Honored Ones."

"Your Mother's words we hear, Honored One," Arjen replied formally.

"Ka'ruchaya Yarra's words to me: That I this man should judge. If he in honor came, and I him worthy found, Ch'kara's shelter was I to offer. He armed and freely came, as fighter, not captive, and I have him observed. I say she will him as clan-son accept, and I may for her his blood-oath take."

There were a few exclamations of disbelief from those of the bridge crew who understood enough English to know what had been said, but they were quickly silenced by Arjen's glare.

"Ch'kara's Ka'ruchaya generous is," the Fleet-Captain said. "But this assignment secret was. How knew she?"

"Our Speaker her informed. No breach there was."

When Arjen nodded as though that explained everything, Tarlac had to resist an impulse to shake his head violently. It felt as if it were full of cobwebs. Hovan needing his Clan Mother's permission to perform an adoption wasn't too hard to accept; at least nominally, women ran families in quite a few cultures. But a "Speaker" being able to give out classified information was damn near incredible—and having it accepted so matter-of-factly made it even worse. Still, he couldn't object; he was a guest here, and Hovan was going on. "He should a proper ceremony have, or as close as may under war conditions done be. Will you have any n'Cor'naya who free are, in the exercise hall assemble?"

"Of course, Cor'naya. In half a tenth-day?"

"Fine," Hovan said. "Afterwards, I must a message to Ch'kara's clanhome on Norvis send, clan priority."

"You will it have," Arjen replied.

"My thanks."

With that, Hovan and Tarlac left the bridge, going to the meal hall to wait the hour or so that was "half a tenth-day." Once they were settled with mugs of hot chovas, Tarlac said, "You must have one hell of a lot of clan status."

"Enough," Hovan said with a smile. "I have six younglings shared, and I have an officer been for almost a year. That does status bring, near what Ch'kara's oldest male enjoys, close to Ka'ruchaya Yarra and she who for the Lords speaks, Daria."

Well, Tarlac thought with amused chagrin, there went his last night's speculation about females being property. He must have been tireder than he'd thought—he should never have gotten that idea after Hovan had referred to a Clan Mother administering the death penalty! Oh, well. "If it's not prying, how old are you?"

"You will soon of Ch'kara be; no prying is. I thirty-five Homeworld years have, almost forty-six Imperial Standard. You?"

"Thirty-five too, but Standard."

Hovan made a quick calculation. "Twenty-seven, Homeworld. And you already a Ranger are? That hard to believe is. How?"

"It's not really a matter of age," Tarlac said. "They grab all of us young, on purpose. They got me when I applied for the Naval Academy and took that ungodly battery of tests. Those ran for a solid week, and by the time they were over I was beat—so tired it didn't even register when, late afternoon of the last day, someone knocked on the door of my room. But when the door opened anyway and I rolled over to see who the intruder was, I damn near fainted. Linda Ellman was standing in the doorway grinning at me, and I thought for a while I was dreaming. Rangers do have better things to do than show up in cadet-candidates' rooms, after all. It just doesn't happen.

"But she was there, and she invited me into the group. I'm not too sure what I said, because the next day I'd decided all over again that it was a dream. It wasn't until later in the morning, when she showed up again as we were getting ready for the swearing-in ceremony, that I started believing. Until then, I'd had every intention of staying in the Navy. When she asked if I'd reconsidered, though, I realized I couldn't pass up the chance, and I said yes.

"When I did, she smiled and said, 'We thought you would,' then pinned a badge on my cadet tunic and took me to the Palace to meet Emperor Yasunon. We were together for most of the next two years, with her giving me on-the-job training." Tarlac smiled, reminiscent. "That was a good time. But I gather things were different for you?"

"Different, yes," Hovan said. "My life for a fighter routine has been. I this life early chose, and at fourteen I was to fighter school sent. At eighteen I the final tests passed, then the Ordeal took and the ground combat service joined. From there I rank made, and last year won I these." He indicated his collar tabs again.

"Um. You all come up through the ranks, then? No direct commissions?"

"That right is. And all officers must n'Cor'naya be."

"So what's the average age for someone to make Team-Leader?"

"Between sixty and sixty-five Homeworld years."

Tarlac whistled admiringly. "And you're half that. Damn good! I can see why that'd gain you status." He hesitated, then decided to ask; Hovan had said there was no prying involved. "What about the young you shared? They gave you status too,"—Hovan had mentioned them even before his rank—"okay. But what're they like? How—"

Hovan cut the man off with a gesture, noted the expression of distaste at his extended claws, and carefully didn't smile. "The younglings you should for yourself see. They will us on Homeworld meet. Can you until then your curiosity restrain?"

"If you want me to," Tarlac said. He'd had little experience with proud parents, but was quite familiar with people wanting to show off; it was one aspect of a Ranger's job, usually boring, occasionally pleasant.

"I think you will not disappointed be." Hovan knew he was smiling. It would be good to introduce Steve to the clan, especially to Sharya and Casti. He was sure the man would find acceptance and, Lords willing, the closeness he had sacrificed for his Empire. The man could not truly miss what he had never known, growing up with only his two parents, but it was something he should have. Now, though, he had to explain what Steve was to do at the ceremony.

When they arrived at the exercise hall, half a tenth-day almost to the second after they'd left the bridge, the hall was crowded with open-shirted officers and men from the entire combined Fleet, waiting silent and expectant. Tarlac was aware of what this ceremony meant, and was determined to carry out the role Hovan had explained to him in a way that would do credit to his new family.

As soon as they had taken their places in the open area in the center of the floor, Hovan raised his arms and began a songlike chanting similar to the previous night's. This time, Tarlac knew that it was a prayer asking the Lords' blessing on his adoption. Unable to join in, knowing neither words nor music, the Ranger stood at parade rest, his head bowed. As a relaxed agnostic, he was quite willing to honor others' beliefs as far as he could.

The adoption ceremony itself was simple, an exchange of blood and oaths. When Hovan had explained it, Tarlac had wondered briefly, surprised that it was so close a parallel to some of Terra's ceremonies. He'd finally decided it was almost inevitable; an exchange of vital fluid was an obvious symbol of kinship, and the wrist was an equally obvious place to draw blood, on a

humanoid.

So, when Hovan extended a claw and dug into his left arm, Tarlac used the dagger he'd borrowed from his sponsor to follow suit. They took token sips of each other's blood, and then Hovan held the cuts together while the Ranger gave his oath, including his own modification of it.

"I pledge to Clan Ch'kara that I will bring no dishonor to its name, and will defend that name and the clan's property and people to the best of my ability, so long as that involves no harm or dishonor to the Terran Empire I have also sworn to protect."

The qualification drew an unspoken sense of approval from the gathered n'Cor'naya, perhaps not surprisingly among these people. Hovan replied, "For Mother Yarra and Clan Ch'kara, I your pledge accept. Ch'kara you claims, as kin in blood and honor. The clan you guards, as you it defend."

The brief ceremony over, Hovan released his new ruhar's wrist. Tarlac grabbed it and applied pressure to stop the bleeding, noting that Hovan's wound was already closing, as he considered his new and unique position. He was a Ranger of the Empire, yet at the same time he was a member of a Traiti—until now, an enemy—clan. He had carefully qualified his oath, and he'd done everything he could for the Empire before boarding the Hermnaen. Still, the idea of owing allegiance to both sides in a war was … disquieting. He had to resolve the war now. He didn't expect to have to decide between the sides in battle; he was out of the war as an active agent. But he was going to be damned active at peacemaking!

In the meantime, most of the n'Cor'naya had closed their shirts, signifying a return to Fleet

duty, and were quietly leaving the exercise hall. Only four remained, Arjen and three that Hovan introduced as members of Ch'kara; they greeted Tarlac as well as their scanty English and his non-existent Language would allow.

It was proper now for them to show concern over their ruhar's still-bleeding wrist, and they did. Tarlac understood, without quite knowing how, and appreciated it. Once the greetings were over, Hovan led Steve out of the exercise hall and deeper into the ship. "Come, ruhar. You should medical help have."

Tarlac didn't need any more than his nose, a few minutes later, to know they were nearing a medical facility. The smell of antiseptic had to be universal, at least for warm-blooded oxygen breathers like Terrans and Irschchans—and Traiti. The Ranger was willing to bet cloudcats' antiseptics would have smelled the same, if they'd had any.

The cleanliness was as characteristic as the odor, and when a Traiti in pale blue came up to Tarlac and took his arm, he didn't resist. The bleeding still hadn't stopped completely, and the medic turned to Hovan with what sounded, to the Ranger's limited experience, like an angry question. Hovan's reply changed the medic's expression. He checked the wound, cleaned it, then held the edges together and sprayed it with something cool and gray. The Traiti version of synthiskin, probably, Tarlac thought.

Afterwards the medic checked and cleaned Hovan's cut, but didn't bother with any further treatment. It looked half-healed, whether or not it was.

When the medic was done with Hovan, Tarlac spoke to him. "It feels better already. Thanks."

"He your speech knows not," Hovan told Steve, then said something to the medic in their liquid tongue. When he turned back to the Ranger, he was smiling. "He says you him too much honor give. He has never before a human treated; that you well responded only fortunate was."

"I meant what I said," Tarlac replied. "It may be a minor wound, but I know skill when I see it." He was sincere. The medic had been assured and gentle, clearly a trauma expert, and Tarlac had to assume the easing of pain in his arm could be credited to the synthiskin. That was a technique the humans had so far not developed.

"He you thanks," Hovan said after a further exchange. "But he says you should not so deep have cut. The mixing of blood now only a symbol is."

"I didn't go deep," Tarlac said. "Just enough to nick the vein. You can tell him I'll keep it in mind, though." He smiled at the medic, the only direct communication he could manage, while Hovan translated.

When they left the medical center, Hovan looked thoughtfully at Steve. The man was a guest on this ship, and he was now of Ch'kara—but he was still human, and Hovan was well aware that there were those aboard the Hermnaen who thought honor was no more binding toward humans that it was toward vermin. Steve had the freedom of the ship, and while Hovan was sure nobody would take any overt action, he was equally sure "accidents" could be easily arranged. With a human's delicate build, even a minor accident could prove fatal.

"Steve, ruhar," he said at last, "I must you caution. Not all crewmembers of this adoption approve, even though it was by the Lords decreed, and some may you ill wish. You may choose, but it would best be if you with me stay, or with my men."

Tarlac was sure he detected real concern in the deep soft voice. This time yesterday, if they'd met in battle, Hovan would have killed him without hesitation, and vice versa. Now, he realized with surprise, he was convinced the Traiti would protect him as swiftly from his own people, if necessary.

He wondered if joining Clan Ch'kara had made him closer "kin" to Hovan than non-Ch'kara Traiti were. That, he was to learn, was exactly the case, and was also the reason the military seldom allowed n'ruhar to serve closely together. Clan ties were so strong that not even the strictest military discipline could overcome them.

All the Ranger had to go on now, however, was his own judgement, and that told him to trust Hovan. "Ruhar, I don't know enough about Traiti ways to make an intelligent choice. I'll do whatever you recommend."

Hovan stopped and turned toward the green-uniformed human. "Ruhar, you do me honor. Stay, then, with me." And, gently, he touched one hand, claws fully extended, to the side of Steve's throat. His claws were to protect, not to harm, his clanmate.

Tarlac saw the gesture as it began and waited for it, unflinching. He didn't move, even at Hovan's slow smile; he sensed reassurance, not threat. Why was he adapting so quickly—so easily!—to Traiti patterns? How could he adapt so easily? Especially since he was almost totally ignorant about them? Dammit, humans and Traiti had been at war for years, and he was human in everything but the past day's experiences!

Well, he was adapting; that was another fact he had to accept. He returned Hovan's smile and touched one of the deadly claws. "I'm in your hands."

Morning at Ch'kara's main clanhome on Norvis came in the middle of Hovan's sleep period. Preferring to disturb his own rest rather than his Clan Mother's, Hovan had the duty Communications operator place his call then. Contact was almost immediate on the clan-priority call, and Ka'ruchaya Yarra must have been waiting; she was on the screen before she could have been summoned. Hovan greeted her respectfully, sure that his expression gave away his news before he could speak it.

It did. Yarra returned his greeting, then said, "We have a new ruesten, Cor'naya?"

"Yes, Ka'ruchaya. Esteban Tarlac, called Steve." Hovan gave her a brief yet complete account of everything that had happened since Steve had come aboard, finishing, "He has much to learn, Ka'ruchaya, and he may make mistakes, but he is true Ch'kara. He will not dishonor the clan."

"We can expect no more," Yarra said, smiling. "You carried out your trust as well as I was sure you would, Hovan. You have my thanks."

Hovan accepted the compliment with pleasure, then asked anxiously, "Have my n'ka'ruhar and our n'esten left yet?"

Yarra nodded reassuringly. "Do not concern yourself, ruesten. The younglings you share, and those you share them with, will be leaving for Homeworld tomorrow. I held the ship until I heard from you, to give them the news myself. They will still get to Homeworld before you do."

"I was not truly worried, Ka'ruchaya … but my thanks. It has been a long time."

"I know. And I am sure this is your sleep time. I will not keep you from your mat any longer.

Dream well, ruesten."

"I will, Ka'ruchaya. Farewell."

With that, the contact ended, and Hovan went to dreams of the coming reunion that were as pleasant as anyone could wish. Most of the next week and a half saw Hovan and Tarlac together continuously, the Ranger getting a crash course in all the basics of a Traiti clan, from Language to customs and courtesies. The Ordeal was neither short nor continuous, so he would be part of Traiti society for some time, both aboard the Hermnaen and on Homeworld. The more he knew about his adopted clan and culture, the better.

Even without that consideration, Tarlac was delighted at the opportunity for such studies. An acute case of curiosity was another part of being a Ranger, and the few fragments he'd picked up at first only increased his interest. He wondered for a while at their lack of teaching tapes, which meant he had to memorize everything the hard way, but that was fairly minor. His only problem with it was that he didn't expect to have everything perfect by the time they landed. Hovan agreed, but assured him nobody would expect perfection, only that he learn enough to avoid giving serious offense.

The first lesson, reasonably enough, dealt with military customs, and Tarlac found out that wearing his gun had meant respect to the Traiti, not a threat. They had classed Rangers with the military, as fighters—and for one fighter to voluntarily meet others unarmed was a deadly insult. The Traiti were aware that there was no way Tarlac could have known that custom, but even so, the fact that he had come to them armed was seen as a good omen.

Language took more time, but was essential since not many Traiti spoke Imperial English at

all, and even fewer spoke it as well as Arjen and Hovan. Tarlac found Language a challenge. English had become universal on Terra and its colonies, even where other languages were spoken; he'd never had to speak anything else, though he'd learned to read the cloudcats' tongue-talk.

And what the Traiti called simply Language had little in common with English. The most obvious difference was its tonality, much to Tarlac's frustration and Hovan's amusement. While the Ranger enjoyed and could appreciate music, he'd never done any serious singing; it took days for him to learn to make his voice do what he wanted it to.

But they didn't spend all their time working. Hovan was proud of his ship, and spent much of their leisure showing Steve the Hermnaen and its crew. Even though the flagship was considerably smaller than a Sovereign-class cruiser, there was a lot to show; it was still a full-scale battlewagon. Tarlac was particularly interested in the small, one-man harassment craft it carried, and since Hovan had flown one of them in combat several times, his interest was just as intense and far more personal. It took only one close-up look, though, for Tarlac to understand why such tiny craft were so surprisingly effective.

Barely twelve meters long, the ships humans had labelled "hornets" were nothing more than a beam weapon and its power pack, with a propulsor and basic life-support system wrapped around it and given some armor and ablative shielding. It couldn't stand up to a hit from even a secondary disruptor, so a single hornet posed only a minimal threat to any Imperial ship larger than a courier —but they were normally launched in groups, used to saturate their opponent's defenses, letting the main battlecraft use its heavier weaponry in an all-out attack.

It was an effective tactic, one which had cost the Empire far too many lives and ships. The

Empire didn't know it also cost Traiti lives. Imperial experts believed the little harassment craft were computer-controlled, because of their precise maneuvering and persistent attacks. It didn't really matter; the results were all that counted. Unless, of course, the Ranger added grimly to himself, you happened to be one of the pilots.

Tarlac also found out how the fighters maintained their individual combat proficency at maximum. There was a constant series of one-on-one challenge matches that were as much entertainment as training for the crew. Every fighter on active duty, from Fleet-Captain Arjen to the lowest-ranking commando, was expected to take part, and did so with considerable enthusiasm and usually-friendly rivalry. Standings were hotly contested, and were seldom related to the participant's rank or clan status—though Hovan was rated third in the Fleet.

The matches awed Tarlac, despite what he knew of Traiti endurance and strength. They might be fought with shortswords, or knives, or teeth and claws, at the match judge's option, but rules were minimal and it was perfectly acceptable for a fighter who lost a weapon to continue the match unarmed, no holds barred, until a clear winner emerged. That seldom happened without one or both contestants being wounded, though the judge would stop a match before anyone was maimed or killed.

While he was a very interested spectator, Tarlac didn't participate in either the betting or the matches, which meant that few of the Traiti considered him a real fighter. He was regarded, he thought, as they would regard a youngling who called himself a fighter to impress his elders: with amused tolerance.

And that, Tarlac admitted to Hovan later, was very probably why he accepted when, three days out of Homeworld, a Fire Control operator named Valkan challenged him. It was the only

reason he could think of for his impulsive acceptance, that he resented being treated like a child. He certainly hadn't done it because he thought he would be able to defeat his massive opponent.

By the time the match in progress was over, word of the challenge and acceptance had spread throughout the ship. The grapevine, Tarlac reflected, must be the universe's most effective communications net for Traiti as well as humans. Almost all the off-duty crew gathered in the exercise hall to watch the uneven contest. Most were silent, though a few called encouragement to one combatant or the other, and there was the usual murmur of bets being placed as Tarlac and Valkan removed their shirts and weapons belts.

Tarlac accepted the dagger Hovan offered, getting the feel of it while his sponsor and Valkan spoke to the match judge. There was no question in his mind that what he held was intended as a weapon. Its slim double-edged blade was a quarter meter long, and the hilt, despite being a bit large for his hand, settled easily into the diagonal grip that allowed maximum effectiveness. All in all, the well-balanced blade had a deadly, efficient beauty.

When the brief discussion with the judge was over, Hovan gave Tarlac his ruling. "He as I hoped decided, Steve. This will a knife fight be, since that more skill than strength requires. And for your safety, the judge has two conditions made. If you disarmed are, or if Valkan a good grip on you gets, he an automatic win earns. Otherwise you will both tournament points score, and the first to one hundred reach, wins."

The Ranger nodded. "That sounds reasonable. I'm ready." He'd noticed Hovan's failure to mention any automatic win for him, and grinned briefly at the omission. He might not be likely to win, but he was determined to give it a good try. He faced Valkan and dropped into a knife-fighter's crouch as Hovan stepped back into the audience and the match judge took his place,

giving the signal to begin.

Human and Traiti circled cautiously, evaluating each other. Hovan watched, hoping the judge's precautions would be adequate, though he didn't suspect Valkan of any true hostility toward Steve—not after seeing the K'horan fighter's reaction when Steve accepted challenge. Valkan had been disconcerted, had seemed to want to call off a joke that had backfired, but he couldn't do so without loss of honor. Hovan did have some sympathy for him; he could imagine very clearly how he would be feeling in Valkan's place. He'd want to win, but without doing the human any real harm; it wouldn't be right to send anyone into the Ordeal injured. And he'd be having qualms about fighting the man at all. Steve was an adult fighter, a legal opponent—but Valkan would have to feel as if he were facing an underdeveloped youngling.

Tarlac neither knew about nor shared the Traiti's misgivings. He watched Valkan's moves closely, trying to spot a weakness. He could see none, and decided that if Valkan did have an Achilles' heel, it was psychological. The Traiti's bearing and moves were graceful—and confident.

The Ranger suppressed an urge to smile slightly at that. Of course Valkan was confident! He was taller, had a longer reach, and was accustomed to such matches. But if Tarlac could feed his opponent's confidence until it overwhelmed his caution … he'd only get one opening, at that…

He got the chance to begin putting his plan into effect almost immediately. The Traiti made the first move, lunging for Tarlac's chest. The Ranger dodged, Valkan's blade cutting air less than a centimeter from his skin. His counterattack was a split second too slow to give a disabling slash to Valkan's other arm.

It went on like that for the better part of ten minutes: the human escaping serious injury by what seemed pure luck, his attacks at most nicking his opponent. He was being steadily outpointed, and seemed to be tiring fast.

Hovan watched Steve's losing battle with concern that rapidly became dismay. If this was the Ranger's best, he would have little chance to survive his Ordeal. Granted, he was overmatched, but he shouldn't be moving so clumsily, gasping for breath, so soon!

And then Hovan saw Valkan decide to end it quickly. Steve was obviously near the end of his strength, but he continued to fight even when he had no chance of victory; that did him honor. Then the exhausted human stumbled to one knee with his head and shoulders slumped. Valkan moved in.

His breath rasping audibly, Tarlac watched legs and feet approach. When they were about a meter away, he surged into a forward lunge under the Traiti's blade, bringing his own weapon flashing up to rest with the tip just under Valkan's ribs, angled to stab unopposed into his heart.

The exercise hall was silent, the unexpected move catching even the match judge by surprise; it was a few immobile seconds before he could declare Tarlac the winner.

Breathing easily, since he no longer needed that deception, Tarlac listened to a growing murmur he wasn't quite sure was approval. He was reassured by Hovan's smile as he returned the dagger to his sponsor, then resumed his shirt and belt. He turned apprehensively to Valkan. How would this Traiti react? If he was one of those who opposed the adoption… He almost flinched when a clawed hand touched his shoulder, and the other clasped his right wrist. But there was no hostility in the soft, lilting voice that addressed him, and Valkan was smiling.

"He says that you more dangerous are than you seem," Hovan translated. "And he says that if you not Ch'kara were already, his Ka'ruchaya might have wished, you into K'horan invite."

Hovan was impressed himself. He had expected Steve to lose, if only after giving a creditable account of himself. That he had managed a win at all was barely believable; that it had happened so decisively would make this match well-remembered. And Hovan was less worried about Steve's chances in the Ordeal. Steve must truly be guided by the Lords.

Tarlac returned Valkan's wrist-clasp and replied in one of the Language phrases he'd learned. "You do me honor," he said, and Valkan had: adoptions were unusual, perhaps five to eight in a year for an average-sized clan like the fifteen-thousand-member one he now belonged to.

"But tell them all," Tarlac went on to Hovan in English, "I don't think I'd care to try it again. It's a stunt that worked once. I'm sure it'd never work a second time, and I'm not crazy enough to try it when they know what to expect."

That, when Hovan translated, drew a roar of approval. These were fighters, stark realists all, who could understand and appreciate an honest evaluation of chances. Tarlac's statement, after he'd just finished a knife match unscathed and victorious, was taken as just such an evaluation.

Those who'd bet on him had very good reason to be appreciative; they'd gotten excellent odds, and some would gain clan status for their daring in backing such an underdog. The losers were even more impressed by the human's victory. Even those spectators who still thought most humans incapable of honor were making an exception for Steve Tarlac. In a sense, after all, he couldn't really be called human any more. He'd been adopted by Clan Ch'kara and had proven himself in the matches, which was evidence enough that he was Traiti in spirit, if not in body.

Once he understood it, Tarlac appreciated the sentiment, but he didn't share it. That evening, when he and Hovan were temporarily alone in the sleep-room, he admitted as much. "Hovan, I'm doing the best I can, but I'm not a Traiti. I'm human, and after that fight, I don't know if my best is going to be good enough."

Hovan studied his human ruhar for several minutes without saying anything. He had mingled blood with this man, and though the exchange had been more symbolic that substantial, he felt oddly close to him, closer than to any but the n'ka'ruhar he had shared young with. Steve's sudden self-doubt disturbed him, given what he'd learned about the man. And an attitude of expected defeat was nothing to take into a trial as strenuous and demanding as the Ordeal. But what could he say to help? There was no denying the danger Steve faced, and trying to minimize it would be doing the man a disservice.

There was little he could say, and less he could do, to raise the man's spirits. He would be lending Steve the same kind of emotional support he had received from his own Ordeal sponsor, whenever and wherever tradition allowed it. For now, that was terribly limited, yet he would do what he could. He moved to sit close to the human, not touching him in this out-clan place, and spoke softly. "Ruhar"—the intonation meant "brother/friend"—"there no dishonor in fear, or in failure of the Ordeal, is. And I certain am that you will not fail. You Ch'kara have, whatever in this happens."

Tarlac felt his tension ease momentarily at that assurance, borrowing comfort from Hovan's nearness. It wasn't fear for himself, as much as fear for the Empire and Traiti alike, that held him. Only stubbornnness kept him from succumbing to the awful vision of a dead Homeworld, of Imperial genocide. It made him want to retreat to childhood, to find solace in his sponsor's

strength as he had once found it in his father's.

He couldn't. He couldn't share what he knew, that if he died in failure the Traiti race would not long survive him.

And he was certain, without reason, that he would die.

Chapter III

The Hermnaen was alone when it neared Homeworld's defense perimeter. Arjen's fleet, under Acting Fleet-Captain Jannor, had returned to the combat zone, and the extra ships had been ordered back to their regular duties.

Tarlac and Hovan were seated at two of the control central supervisor consoles, watching the repeater screen. The Ranger never grew tired of watching planetary approaches, even on a screen instead of through a lander's windows. There was something awe-inspiring about watching a world grow from a featureless point to a globe boasting continents and seas—though cloud cover obscured most details on Terra-type worlds.

The Hermnaen descended slowly, gently, on null-grav, and the globe grew until it was beneath them, rather than ahead. Clouds like snow-softened mountains showed rifts, then gave way to clear skies as the flagship let down toward a city-sized spaceport. The guide beam brought

them to a precision landing near the central control building.

Leave for combat crews was automatic any time a warship made friendly planetfall, and Homeworld was the only place where that meant everyone could go to his own clanhome. That it was a branch home, in most cases, didn't matter; being in-clan was what counted. Ship-Captain Exvani, as anxious as anyone to rejoin his family, had called ahead so that every clan with a member aboard the Hermnaen could send transportation, and the ship emptied without delay.

Less than ten minutes after landing, Hovan and Tarlac and the other three members of Ch'kara who'd been at the adoption were being greeted by the driver of a large cream-and-green null-grav car. She was the first Traiti female that Tarlac, and as far as he knew, any human, had ever seen.

She was only slightly less massive than the males, yet she was undeniably attractive by Traiti standards, as he knew from the art he'd studied, and she had an air of lithe grace. Tarlac, though he knew it was inappropriate, found she made him think of a Valkyrie. She was no fighter, couldn't possibly be if all he'd learned about the Traiti was correct, but she gave the impression of a warrior maiden.

Seated between the driver and Hovan, Tarlac had a sudden feeling of belonging here; despite his misgivings, he liked it. He'd already decided, since there was no way to ignore his apprehension, to refuse to let himself be distracted by his fear. He couldn't afford it. While he still knew almost nothing about the Ordeal he'd agreed to take, he had no doubt that it would call on every resource he had.

In the meantime, he'd learned enough to know that his original idea about the status of

females was not just mistaken but laughable. Yes, they were only a fourth of the Traiti population, cherished and protected from any possible harm, and even a discussion of endangering one unnecessarily bordered on obscenity. But they weren't considered, as he'd wrongly speculated, either inferior in any way, or as breeding stock or valuable property. Far from it. If anything, they had more status than any males except the n'Cor'naya, the Honored Ones who'd passed the Ordeal. They were responsible for both religion and clan life, things which were far more important to the Traiti than humans had guessed.

The clans, not warfare, were the center of Traiti culture. And yet, even with females running those two vital areas, it wasn't a matriarchy. Males ran commerce and, obviously, the military; in other fields such as science or the arts, gender had no bearing. The combination made for a "government," if you felt generous about the definition, that couldn't possibly work for humans. Not even if it had been imposed by a god, as Hovan assured Tarlac it had. There were two rulers, the male Supreme who was exactly that in secular affairs, and the female First Speaker for the Circle of Lords, equally powerful in religious matters.

But those two acted only when something concerned the entire race. Everything else was handled on a clan level, from education to deep-space colonization. Despite Hovan's attempts to explain, Tarlac didn't quite understand how some of what the Traiti had accomplished could be done on such a seemingly casual basis, and he could only suppose they would find the human bureaucracy equally puzzling.

The two civilizations were most similar, ironically enough, in the structure of their military forces. Even that was largely on the surface; any military required a clear chain of command. Otherwise . . . the clans cooperated to produce both commercial ships and warcraft, and in

crewing them, with the crew members supported by their individual clans. Then, under the Supreme's command, the war fleets defended the race.

Tarlac shrugged and turned his attention to his surroundings. The spaceport, so much like its Imperial counterparts, was behind them and they were approaching the capital city. Hovan had described it, so Tarlac knew what to expect: large, relatively low buildings, none over three stories high, set apart from each other in almost parklike surroundings. In several of the larger buildings they passed, females stood at the central doors; they were the clan's sub-Mothers, though rarely—when this was the clan's main home—it might be the Ka'ruchaya herself waiting to formally welcome her clan-children.

Tarlac enjoyed the drive and the scenery. It reminded him of a Terran college campus or an Irschchan town, though with a greater similarity to Terra since Homeworld's sky was blue, not green. The air smelled good, clean and alive after the flatness of recycled ship's air, and he could tell the Traiti liked it as much as he did.

They passed a shopping area, where the buildings were more brightly colored and closer together, yet still not crowded, and the Terran got his first look at groups of Traiti civilians. Most were closed-shirt males who hadn't earned Honor scars, but he saw some females, one with an infant, and a few n'Cor'naya. All wore loose-fitting, brightly colored clothing, though there was no other uniformity of dress. Styles varied by clan and by individual taste, from what most Imperials would consider barely decent to full-coverage robes.

They did have one other thing in common. Much to Tarlac's amazement, all seemed genuinely cheerful. He turned to his sponsor. "Don't they know how the war's going?"

"Of course." Hovan was surprised by the question. "Such things must in honor known be. Why? Do yours not know?"

"Sure they do," Tarlac replied. "But we're winning—we don't have any reason to be depressed."

"Sadness would no good do," Hovan said calmly. "What the Lords decree, is." He looked around. "This area familiar seems … we should the clanhome nearing be. I have only once to Homeworld been, though, so I cannot sure be."

His memory was accurate; less than a minute later, the car came to a halt in front of one of the branch clanhome buildings. It was of average size, perhaps a quarter-kilometer on a side—plenty of room for the five hundred or so who represented Ch'kara on Homeworld. It would be good, Hovan thought, simply to be back in-clan, back in the closeness and peace he valued so highly—and there was Ka'ruchaya Yarra's promise. He looked at Steve, pleased to see the man's expression was calm and interested.

Tarlac indicated the female standing motionless in front of the open door and asked quietly, "Ka'chaya Yvian?"

"Yes, of—" Hovan broke off as he glanced upward, inhaling with a hiss through surprise-thinned nostrils. "Yarra! She here came?"

Tarlac recalled one of the fine points of custom he'd learned, that the Clan Mother very rarely left the main clanhome, and then only if it was important to the clan's survival or honor. That Yarra was here, now, could only be because of him, to show she regarded her alien es'ruesten, her

new clan-child, as fully one of Ch'kara.

It was something he hadn't expected; it was an honor, and it added to his determination to succeed in the Ordeal, to bring credit to his adopted clan. He climbed out of the car with the others and followed them up the steps to accept her formal welcome. The Ranger, ranking almost at the top in the Terran Empire, was the only one in the group without Honor scars, so he ranked lowest here. When the others bowed, holding out dagger hilts so the Ka'ruchaya could touch those and then her n'ruesten, Tarlac knelt as was proper for an unscarred male, drawing his blaster and extending its grip. He was pleased when she welcomed him as she had them, touching the blaster's grip and then his forehead.

Still kneeling, he looked up. "Ka'ruchaya, Hovan says you speak English, so I want you to know firsthand that I had to qualify my oath to the clan. I don't want to be accepted under the wrong assumptions. I took my oath as a Ranger of the Empire first, and that obligation will always be first for me."

"Yes, I English speak," Yarra replied, "and I your reservation understand. I that expected, in one Hovan would worthy of adoption find. You must, of course, that first oath first honor." She smiled, and raised him to his feet. "I will to you later speak, ruesten. Now come. You n'ruhar have to meet, after you are to the Lords introduced."

Tarlac holstered his blaster, following his Clan Mother and clanmates into the building. The entranceway was about ten meters square, with halls to either side and double doors straight ahead leading to the clanhome's heart, the gathering hall. When the double doors slid open, Tarlac couldn't see much except Traiti. The hall was filled with them, leaving only one open lane down the center of the room. He knew what the hall looked like, from Hovan's descriptions: a hundred

meters wide by a hundred and fifty deep, and unlike the rest of the clanhome, undecorated. Its only furnishing, except for special occasions, was the silvery two-tiered altar opposite the entrance. The clan's Speaker for the Circle of Lords, Daria, waited there to introduce Tarlac to the Traiti gods.

He smiled at that. He and Hovan had, inevitably, touched on religion in their discussions, and Hovan had found his agnosticism at first baffling, then amusing. It seemed the Traiti took their gods pretty much for granted, absolutely certain of their reality but expecting nothing from them other than acceptance at death. Hovan had finally given up on that debate with the extended-claw gesture that was roughly equivalent to a shrug, saying that Steve would learn.

Well, there was always a chance that Hovan was right. Tarlac was well aware the universe held a lot more things than he knew, but this was one he had no intention of bothering about. If the gods were interested in him, they'd shown no signs of it, and he saw no reason to change his stand on the matter unless they did.

The procession including Tarlac, Hovan and Yarra was at the altar by then, and this time the new clanmember was the only one who didn't kneel. He bowed to the green-robed Speaker standing on the dais, then, at her gesture, ascended the three steps to stand facing her. She grasped his wrist, led him to the altar, and indicated that he should place his hands on it, palms down.

Tarlac cooperated willingly, but his attention was less on what he was doing or the chant Daria had begun than the statuettes on the altar's upper tier. There were eleven of them, images of the Traiti gods— three of whom were actually, by his definition, goddesses—as exquisitely crafted as a cloudcat-made tapestry. They were about thirty centimeters high, sculpted and colored with such artistry that they might have been miniature Traiti, perfect but unmoving.

Then Daria's chant ended. Tarlac stepped back from the altar, crossed hands over his chest, and bowed. That ended the ceremony, and started the party.

As Tarlac rejoined Hovan, he discovered there weren't as many Traiti in the gathering hall as he'd thought. The lane of bodies which was all he'd been able to see had concealed tables laden with food and drink, as well as other members of the clan.

Several females and younglings came forward carrying drinks—and something the Ranger had known only intellectually suddenly became an emotional reality to him. This was a family, as close and loving as any human family, and he was a part of it. Until now, no living human could testify to anything but Traiti enthusiasm and skill in battle. The remains of those who'd run into Traiti suicide commandos were even more eloquent. But these adolescent females offering glasses to the five from the Hermnaen weren't fighters. They were no taller than Tarlac, and he had adapted enough, thanks to the shipboard artwork, to think of them as attractive young ladies.

The girl who approached him said something, smiling, took a sip from one of the two glasses she held and handed it to him, then touched his forehead. Hovan had told him about this; it was part of the adoption. It wasn't essential, but it was a good way to let him meet his new relatives and vice versa—as well as being a good excuse for a party. Tarlac took a small drink, returned the touch, and traded glasses to drink again.

Then Hovan tapped him on the shoulder, and after they traded drinks and touches—just once, this time—he introduced the girls who had served the two of them, smiling widely. "Sharya and Casti my n'ka'esten are, from one birth."

Tarlac greeted Casti as he had Sharya, impressed. Twin daughters! No wonder Hovan wanted

to play the proud parent, with multiple births in any given clan averaging about a century apart. "I see why you asked me to restrain my curiosity, ruhar. It was worth the wait."

Others, three boys and five women, one carrying an infant, joined them as he was attempting a polite comment to the girls in what little Language he knew. The first one Hovan introduced was Sandre, mother of the twins and the only open-shirted female Tarlac had seen. She had Honor scars identical to Hovan's, which surprised Tarlac for a moment since he knew she couldn't have taken the Ordeal. He decided—and later learned he was correct—that they must be because she'd borne the twins. He didn't know whether it was proper or not, but it shouldn't hurt to be polite; he gave her the respectful crossed-arm bow.

It didn't. He heard approving comments, then she said one of the few things he understood: "You do me honor, ruhar," and traded drinks and touches.

Tarlac had no time to reply before he had to greet the rest of what he could only think of as Hovan's immediate family. The last he met was the youngest, and when Tarlac reached to touch the baby girl, he found out the truth of something he'd heard about babies.

They liked to taste things.

Tarlac yelped, more in surprise than pain, pulled his finger out of her grasp, and ruefully inspected the small wounds. "Hey, youngster, I thought there was only supposed to be one exchange of blood."

She gurgled happily at him while her mother spoke.

"She teething is," Hovan translated, then examined the bite himself. "Want you medical help?"

Tarlac shook his head, grinning. "I'm not that fragile—she just startled me."

"Good. She really too young is, here to be, but I wanted you all to meet."

"I'm glad you did," Tarlac said, as the mother and baby left for the nursery. "She's a pretty little one." He meant it. She was prettier than a human at the same age, he found himself thinking. The infant Traiti seemed somehow more … finished, maybe because Traiti never grew noticeable hair, or maybe because he had adapted more thoroughly than he knew. Whatever the reason, the fact was undeniable. So was the fact, he thought grimly, that if he died in the Ordeal she would very probably die too, under Imperial weapons.

"You only that say, because she the first you met have who smaller than you is," Hovan said, wondering at Steve's brief frown. This was supposed to be a glad celebration—and it was all right; the man's expression was clearing.

"Well, maybe a little," Tarlac conceded. "When a teenage kid's as tall as I am and masses at least twice as much, it's nice to see someone smaller. And speaking of size—" He held up his drink, about the tenth or twelfth glass he'd traded. "This wine doesn't have much of a kick, but even if I only take a sip every time I meet someone, it won't be long before I'm wiped out. You might stay fairly sober, but I won't be able to, even if I were used to drinking. I'll probably make an ungodly fool of myself."

Hovan grinned. "Probably, and it expected is. The wine mild is because you small are. If you

Traiti were, we would something stronger drinking be. No adoption party successful is, unless the new ruhar must in bed poured be."

Tarlac had to laugh. "By that standard, ruhar, this'll likely be the most successful adoption party in Traiti history! But let's not make it a success too early, okay? I'm hungry."

"Food good sounds," Hovan agreed. "And I will with you stay, in case anything must translated be. Ka'ruchaya Yarra and I the only two are, who much English speak."

Several more drink-trades later, Tarlac made it to one of the well-stocked tables and built himself a thick sandwich. That process got quite a few interested comments, but by Traiti custom none were addressed to him until he'd finished eating. When he was done, the interest in getting him drunk was replaced, at least temporarily, by inquiries about the new way of fixing something to eat. It was hard for the Ranger to believe that people as enthusiastic about food as the Traiti hadn't either stumbled across something as simple as a sandwich, or purposely developed it, but their keen attention and the eager experimentation that followed made it clear they hadn't.

Unfortunately for Tarlac's sobriety, that respite didn't last long. Within half an hour, his n'ruhar were again introducing themselves. Hovan wasn't needed often as a translator; with so many anxious to meet their new relative, Tarlac had very limited opportunities for conversation.

He soon lost any trace of doubt that he would live up to custom, too, whether he wanted to or not. By the time about a third of those in the gathering hall had introduced themselves, he had a distinct buzz on. He had also come to the firm, if rather woozy, conclusion that these people, his new family, were the finest in the galaxy. Especially the big gray-skinned guy beside him, the brother he'd never had. Before.

He was never sure, later, how many more of Ch'kara he did meet. Things were getting blurry and disconnected, and never improved. He did remember singing, probably off-key, and later hanging onto Hovan's arm for support.

Hovan felt a tug on his sleeve and looked down to see a silly grin on Steve's upturned face. The man mumbled something, so slurred Hovan couldn't make it out, then released Hovan's arm and closed unfocussed eyes to slump bonelessly to the floor, still smiling.

Looking around at the n'ruhar who had seen Steve's collapse, Hovan translated the Ranger's earlier prediction aloud into Language, then smiled indulgently down at him. "And it seems he was right. He has had a very successful party. Time to pour him, as I promised, into bed." He stooped, picked up the slightly-built man with no difficulty, and turned to Yarra. "I think he'd better sleep in the infirmary tonight, Ka'ruchaya."

"I agree. And tell the nurse to let him sleep until he wakes by himself. The Supreme has said he and the First Speaker will wait until Steve is ready to see them."

"They do him much honor."

Tarlac woke up once during the night, and was vaguely aware of being helped to someplace where he vomited and afterwards collapsed. Then he was carried back to bed, where dim light showed him a reassuring shark-toothed smile before a cool cloth covered his forehead and eyes and he went out again.

The next time he woke it was to lights that were too bright. He squeezed his eyes shut and groaned, wishing he were still unconscious.

There was a light touch on his arm, and a musical voice said something he couldn't understand but thought was sympathetic. He didn't want sympathy, he wanted to die. Well, maybe he just wanted anything that would end the misery. He recognized a hangover, though he'd never had one this bad before; while it would end in time, he wouldn't enjoy the next few hours.

Then an arm under his head and shoulders raised him and a different voice, Hovan's, said, "Drink." There was a glass at his lips; he obeyed without thought.

What he drank was almost too sour to swallow, but within a few minutes he was feeling better. A little bit. "What time is it?"

"Midday, twelve and a half hours by your timepiece."

Tarlac groaned again, forcing his eyes open. "You do this to everybody you adopt?"

"No, ruhar. You a bad reaction had, an allergy, Doctor Channath says. You should soon better feel."

"Uhh. That'll teach me to drink Traiti liquor." Tarlac tried to sit up, refusing Hovan's assistance, noticing only then that he'd been undressed and was on a sleeping mat laid atop a platform instead of on the floor. He made it upright, but the effort brought on a wave of dizzy sickness, and standing up didn't work. His knees buckled, forcing Hovan to catch him and sit him back on the bed.

"You should in bed remain," Hovan told him, concerned. "The medicine more time than that needs."

"I have to get to the 'fresher." Tarlac tried again to stand, somewhat more successfully, and managed a couple of wobbly steps. Then Hovan's arm went around his shoulders, steadying and turning him.

"This way, ruhar. That door to the hallway leads."

"Okay." Tarlac was gratefuy for the guidance, but appreciated Hovan's simple presence and his uncritical support even more.

By the time Tarlac finished cleaning up, the dose of whatever-it-was had taken full effect and he felt considerably more able to take in his surroundings. One of the first things he noticed was that Hovan was no longer in uniform; instead, he wore civilian clothes, a silvery open shirt with bright blue trousers and quilted mid-calf boots. A chain fastened his knife to the sash that belted his trousers. He'd brought similar clothing for the Ranger, in red and gold.

Tarlac put it on, seeing immediately that his badge was already pinned to the shirt. Wearing something other than a uniform felt strange—he hadn't worn anything else in public since the war started—but one uniform certainly wouldn't last forever, and he still didn't know how long the Ordeal would take. Or what it consisted of.

The clothes fit well, though sleeves and trouser legs were a good ten centimeters too short by Terran standards. Apparently it was good style in Ch'kara, though, since Hovan's fit the same way. Tarlac's gun wasn't there, probably in storage with his uniform; instead, he'd been given a knife very similar to the one he'd used in the challenge match aboard the Hermnaen. "I gather you borrowed these from a youngling?"

"Yes. And Sandre them tailored, you to fit. Now come. Food ready for you is, then I must your education begin. Much there is you have to learn, before you the Ordeal begin."

"Such as?" Tarlac asked. Maybe he'd finally find out what he'd gotten himself into.

"Forestcraft, of course, and—" Hovan broke off. "By the Lords! I never did you tell, even of the parts I now can. I must your pardon ask."

They were out of the infirmary, walking down a wide tapestry-hung corridor. "You've got it, if you'll tell me whatever you can. Wilderness survival is part of it?"

"Yes, and you know not this world's life. Then there the Vision is, if you one granted are, and you of the Scarring know."

"Yeah, I hurt just thinking about that part. It's in that order?"

"It may be, yes. The first it not my place to discuss is, and the Scarring always last is. The other three parts may in any order be. I cannot you of one of them tell, because it would by foreknowledge influenced be."

Tarlac could understand that, though it didn't quiet his curiosity. "At least I know more about it now than I did when I agreed to take it."

"The Fleet-Captain you nothing told?"

"Oh, sure. He told me that according to the First Speaker, if I did take it and live, I'd be able

to bring an honorable peace for both sides. That didn't leave me much choice."

"The Lords this of you asked?" Hovan said, impressed. "I knew that not."

"If that's what he meant, yes." Tarlac didn't believe in the Lords, but Hovan did; it wouldn't hurt to agree.

Hovan smiled widely. "So you us life in honor bring. That good is."

"If I live." Tarlac frowned. "Hovan … I don't think I will live. I haven't thought so since I boarded your ship, and since the fight, I've been certain of it. This Ordeal's going to kill me." He paused and shrugged, wondering at his own calm. "Oh, that won't keep me from trying. Maybe just trying will be enough to do what the First Speaker said, I don't know. Hell, I don't even know how I'm supposed to bring peace if I do live!"

"Since the Lords this asked," Hovan said calmly, "you should not so many doubts have. They nothing ask unless it possible is. And after you the fight won, I certain am that they intend not for you to fail."

"I won the fight by a trick," Tarlac said bleakly. "I won't live through the Ordeal by a trick."

Hovan stopped and took Steve by the shoulders. "Why did you not all this say when it first you troubled? I your sponsor am."

"I couldn't. It was something I had to come to terms with by myself." Tarlac found himself suddenly wishing he had mentioned it that night, had given in to his urge to seek comfort. "I …

I've been a Ranger for fifteen years, Hovan. Almost half my life. I just … I couldn't—"

Hovan shook him with controlled ease, just enough to silence him. "You of Ch'kara now are, Steve, and in-clan. Yourself be, not another's image. That not a weakness is."

"What? I—"

"To me listen, ruhar. Everyone help needs, sometimes. That does not weakness show, or shame bring." Hovan released Steve's shoulders, and put his arms around the man instead, giving Tarlac the feeling of being held by something with the weight and patient strength of an oak tree. "Let me your troubles ease, as my sponsor mine eased."

Feeling himself part of a family for the first time since adolescence, Steve Tarlac gave in, letting loneliness and detachment melt out of him in long-delayed tears. When he couldn't push the fear aside any longer and it took over, he shook in Hovan's embrace with terror of a failure that would cost more than any mortal should be asked to bear.

He couldn't avoid the risk, or the fear; all he could do was rage at the sheer injustice of it. Part of him knew that wouldn't do any good, but he couldn't help himself. He clung to his sponsor for what felt like an eternity, buffeted by the terror and impossible conflict.

Hovan supported him, sharing what he could of the man's turbulence and offering strength to help him accept the rest. The Lords never asked the impossible—but they never asked anything easy, either, and this was only the first part of what Steve would have to endure. Still, Steve had already managed to endure loneliness a Traiti would have found unbearable, and had concealed his terror until he was urged to accept help; he would work his way through this.

Gradually, the Ranger's emotional stability returned, and he knew that was due in no little part to Hovan's support. When the worst of his internal storm had passed, he felt purged—still certain he would die, but now accepting the fear instead of ignoring it so that it ate blindly at his confidence. He rested for a moment more, then looked up at his sponsor. "It's okay now."

"You no longer alone are," Hovan said, releasing him. "As I you told when you adopted were, all Ch'kara you supports. Come now; you should something eat."

The brisk return to a favorite, and practical, Traiti subject brought Tarlac all the way back to his current surroundings. "Food?" He thought of the earlier nausea, and shook his head. "I don't know about that, just yet."

"It best for you is, after the medicine you took. Then, if you ready are, the Supreme and First Speaker will you receive."

"Okay, I'll give it a try. That's one meeting I'm really looking forward to."

On the way to the dining room, Tarlac had his first experience with the casual nudity Hovan had told him was an option in-clan. Except for ceremonies and parties, quite a few members did without clothes.

Tarlac, warned, managed to feel only mildly embarrassed when a female wearing nothing but a carrying pouch slung over one shoulder stepped out of a side corridor ahead of them. She saw them and smiled at Tarlac, then hurried to embrace Hovan. He returned the hug before introducing her to Steve as Channath, the clan's chief physician. "She for you last night cared, when you sick were, and this morning's medicine prescribed."

Tarlac gave her a rueful grin, trying not to stare. "Tell her thanks, would you?"

"That not necessary is, but I will her tell." Hovan did so, and translated the reply. "She suggests, you little liquor drink from now on. And if you bad reactions to anything else find, her tell at once."

"Don't worry," Tarlac said emphatically, "I will!" Then he was in the air as Channath hugged him. Back on his feet, surprised but too flattered to mind, he looked bemusedly after Channath's retreating back. "What was that all about?"

"I told you, there much touching is, in-clan." Hovan put an arm around the man's shoulders. "The closeness good is, not so?"

"Yes…" Tarlac said slowly. "Yes, it is. It's strange—I shouldn't like it. A Ranger has to be self-sufficient, has to stay apart—has to be objective and impartial. I'm not, any longer."

"What will that mean, when you to your Empire return?"

Hovan had zeroed in on Tarlac's thought, though the Ranger didn't believe what he described would ever have a chance to happen. "I'll have to retake the psych tests, then it depends. Maybe I'll be disqualified from anything that involves Ch'kara or the Traiti, maybe I'll have to resign. The decision will be up to His Majesty."

"He would you demote?"

"Only if he doesn't have a choice; the Empire needs Rangers. And even if he does have to

demote me, I won't be dishonored or anything. Something like this happened once before, about four hundred years ago, to a Ranger named Jeff Shining Arrow. He lost his detachment, too—got married, had kids—so Empress Lindner made him a Duke. Emperor Davis would probably commission me into the Fleet."

"That no dishonor is, true. Do you think it will to you happen?"

"Yes, if I've changed that much. It could be a lot worse, of course . . . but falling in love's no crime, it's just something the Empire can't afford in a Ranger."

"That the real reason is, then, why you no family have."

"Yeah. I didn't mean to evade the question then, I just wasn't sure I could explain it. I didn't know you very well."

"I understand. You never anyone met, who more to you than the Empire meant." Hovan shook his head. "That a thing of much sadness is."

Tarlac didn't answer. They were at the dining room by then, and food, not conversation, was in order.

Not long after their meal, the two were being escorted through the halls of the single building atop a low hill called Godhome, located in the center of the Traiti capital. Tarlac, not wanting his skepticism to be too obvious, had cautiously asked why the gods needed a material home.

They didn't now, Hovan had told him, and they hadn't since the Supreme Lord of the Circle,

Kranath of St'nar, became the first of the new gods. The old gods, he explained, the ones the Traiti called "those who went before," had left Godhome as … something. Nobody except the Speakers had any real idea about its purpose, and they were saying nothing until the twelfth Lord completed the Circle. At any rate, it had seemed appropriate to join the centers of spiritual and temporal power.

Their escort ushered them into the large open double office shared by the Supreme and the First Speaker; both rulers were waiting for them. They greeted Hovan first, his due as a Cor'naya, and Tarlac used that brief time to study them. The Supreme, like all male Traiti leaders, had Honor scars, but didn't appear distinctive otherwise; he seemed to be middle-aged. The First Speaker, on the other hand, looked young—was certainly no older than Hovan, to outward appearance. But she radiated an aura that awed Tarlac, of immense and serene wisdom that seemed tremendously old, or perhaps ageless.

When the two turned their attention to him, Tarlac didn't respond to their greetings in the Traiti fashion Hovan had taught him. Instead he saluted and introduced himself, as he had when he'd met the Emperor for the first time. "Ranger Esteban Tarlac, of the Terran Empire. It's an honor to meet you."

Hovan translated that, and then the Supreme's reply. "I sorry am, that my invitation more a compulsion was."

"From what Hovan's told me about the way the war's going for you, you didn't have any more choice putting it that way than I did accepting. I just hope it does some good, for both sides. May I contact Emperor Davis, to tell him what I'm doing?"

He knew from the Supreme's tone, even before Hovan translated the words, that the answer was negative. "Fleet-Captain Arjen said, when I him interviewed, that your Ship-Captain would to the Emperor report that you the Ordeal taking are. That all that necessary is." Then he smiled slightly and added, "But I no reason see, you cannot transcripts of intercepted Imperial newscasts receive. I will orders give, that the daily summary to you delivered be."

"Thank you." That was actually more than Tarlac had expected; he'd only asked because it couldn't hurt to try.

"Ranger Esteban Tarlac," the First Speaker said, her English pronunciation careful.

Tarlac turned to her. "Yes, my Lady?"

She went on in Language, with Hovan translating. "Your Ordeal will to human tolerances scaled be. As Fleet-Captain Arjen you told, we ask not certain death, and the Scarring at least would surely fatal be if we did not such allowance make. The Lords stern are, but fair, and you a good sponsor have. There danger is—it must there be—yet no more for you than for any other."

"That's good to hear." It didn't alter his certainty, but it did make Tarlac feel good to know the Traiti leaders were taking such care. "I was wondering, when the Fleet-Captain told me about it. Have you asked any other humans to try the Ordeal?"

"We have no others asked," the Supreme replied through Hovan. "Another has it tried, however. You the second human ruhar are; the first his own mind under questioning destroyed, and was by his interrogator's clan—N'chark—accepted, as clan-born. He the Ordeal tried and failed, without dishonor."

"Will you his name—" Tarlac broke off, shaking his head. "Did it again, Hovan. Sorry. Just ask him the man's name, will you?"

"All that know, ruhar. Horst Marguerre, once a major in the Imperial Marines. One of those he commanded still a prisoner is."

"I've heard of him." So Marguerre'd had the A-I conditioning, had he? Well, that wasn't too surprising; he'd been in Special Forces, most of whom did have it, and he'd been reported missing and presumed dead early in the war. "How did he do?"

"No worse than many." Hovan translated that part of the Supreme's reply, hesitated and spoke to his ruler, then went on to Steve. "He the part failed that I may not to you describe, ruhar. I can only say, he no harm suffered, and seems to be in N'chark happy."

That was better than anyone who used A-I conditioning had been told to expect; Tarlac felt some satisfaction for him. "If he ever gets back to Terra, he can have his memories reimprinted, if he wants; all he'll lose is whatever happened between his last mindscan and the time he used the conditioning." He returned to present duties. "I'd like to see the prisoners, if I may."

After a brief discussion with both rulers, Hovan turned back to Steve. "The Supreme your reason asks."

Tarlac shrugged. "Partly curiosity, I admit, but I'm also the senior Imperial officer here, which makes me responsible for their welfare."

"I will have you to them taken," the Supreme agreed, "since it your duty is, but there no real

need is. They well treated are, and as much freedom as possible have. Those who it wish, have even been private quarters given."

The Supreme's expression as he made that last statement would have convinced Tarlac, even if he hadn't already learned that a Cor'naya's word was as binding as a Sandeman warrior's. Traiti didn't like privacy, and tolerated it only when necessary. Rather like him with newsies, he thought with amusement. "If you say so, I don't see any need to check. I'll take your word."

When Hovan translated, the Supreme smiled. "You do me honor."

Tarlac understood that phrase without translation, and bowed slightly. "May I ask a favor, Supreme?"

"Ask."

"Hovan told me you have record tapes of the first encounter between our scout and your guardship. May I see them?"

It wasn't the Supreme who answered. "You may them see," the First Speaker told him through Hovan, "though for now they would almost nothing to you mean. It would best be if you a little time wait, until you Language know."

"A little time?" Tarlac wasn't sure whether to smile or frown, and did neither. "All right, but at the rate I'm going, it'll be six months before I'll be able to understand them."

The First Speaker's reply was gentle. "Do not on that wager. You might yourself surprise."

There didn't seem any good way to answer that, so Tarlac simply nodded. "Is there anything else?"

"Not of business," she replied, "though you welcome are here to stay, if you wish to with us talk."

"I'd like that very much," Tarlac said, "except that my sponsor tells me I have a lot to learn, and any time I waste costs lives on both sides. So if you'll excuse me, I'd rather get to work."

"We all wish lives to save, Ranger, if it can with honor done be. Go, then, with your sponsor."

At the Ch'kara clanhome, a youngling met them and took them to one of the smaller living rooms, with the information that Ka'ruchaya Yarra had set it aside for them so ruchaya Steve could study undisturbed.

Only it didn't quite work out that way. Tarlac did learn a considerable amount that afternoon, but it was as much about his clanmates as it was about how to survive in Homeworld's wilderness. It seemed that everyone in Ch'kara who knew anything at all about the outdoors was anxious to pass the knowledge along to Steve. Tarlac suspected they were motivated as much by curiosity about him as by anything else. If so, he didn't mind; he found himself savoring his n'ruhar's presence and their frequent touches, and the "team teaching" seemed to be very effective.

What he learned about Homeworld's vegetation and wildlife fascinated him—especially, under the circumstances, the practical details. He found out which plant parts were edible and which to avoid, and that he could eat practically everything that moved. Unfortunately, quite a

few of the moving things would consider him equally edible. Without a Traiti's natural armor, he'd have to depend on luck and brains to avoid that fate.

He couldn't help wishing he could turn a shipload of biologists loose on this planet. Irschcha and Ondrian were the homeworlds of the other two intelligent Imperial races, yet a Terran without specialized medical preparation beforehand would die within a few days, trying to survive in either's wilderness. It wasn't so much nutritional deficiencies as protein incompatibility and allergic reactions. With the exception of the Traiti wine, that didn't apply on Homeworld, as two weeks' experience proved, and Tarlac was extremely curious about the reason. Well, if he ever got back to the Empire, he'd recommend that such a study be made.

For now, though, there was nothing he could do, and his first full day here had been busy; he was tired. He'd get a good night's sleep, then start fresh in the morning.

Chapter IV

When Tarlac woke, though, it wasn't morning and he wasn't on his sleeping mat. It felt like the middle of the night, and he was standing as he had stood once before at the altar in the clanhome's gathering hall, with his palms laid flat on the bare lower platform.

He didn't know why or how he came to be here looking up at the images of those who formed

the Circle of Lords, but it seemed right to him that he stood so, at peace as his hands rested on the alien altar.

Or was it alien? He didn't want it to be, and it certainly didn't seem alien. He knew, now, what he had only felt during the drive to the clanhome. He belonged here, to the Traiti, as surely as he belonged to the Empire, and he had to bring the two together. It was a need he didn't question, any more than he questioned the approval he sensed from somewhere. Stepping back from the altar, he bowed formally.

Conscious of the chilly night air on his bare skin, he descended the steps, intending to return to the sleeproom he shared with Hovan and several other fighters.

There was someone at the far end of the gathering hall, approaching him. He recognized the green-robed figure as the Speaker, Daria, and wondered briefly if being here in his condition was considered disrespectful, or worse.

Apparently it wasn't; she smiled at him. "The Lords saw fit to summon you quickly. Was the communion pleasant?"

"I don't know," Tarlac said. "I don't remember—"

He broke off in shock. She had spoken Language, and he'd answered in it. Not in the halting fragments he'd learned from Hovan, but as easily and fluently as if he'd been speaking Imperial English! "What— How—"

"The Lords taught you, of course." She showed no surprise at that. "But here, I brought a

cloak when I sensed them calling you; I thought you would need it. And come, I will get you some hot chovas. It will warm you."

"Thanks." Tarlac took the cloak gratefully and wrapped it around his body, feeling a sense of relief. He'd adapted well enough to the in-clan nudity that under most circumstances being nude himself might not bother him too badly—but this woman was the clan's religious leader, and he was still uncertain enough not to want to commit any Terran improprieties around her. "The chovas sounds good, too."

By the time they were in the dining room and Daria had brought mugs of aromatic chovas from the always-ready pot in the kitchen, he'd stopped shivering and managed to accept the fact of his new command of Language. He'd also discovered it did him no good to think about how he'd gotten it. When he tried, his thoughts simply shied away from the subject.

"Do the Lords do that sort of thing often?" he asked as they took seats. They weren't the only ones in the dining room, even at this hour, but nobody paid any noticeable attention to them.

"No, they very seldom intervene," she said calmly. "Why? Do your gods speak often?"

"It hasn't been proven that any ever have. I've never really believed in any of Terra's gods." The hot mug between his hands gave off cinnamon-flavored steam. "I'm not very good at taking things on faith."

"On faith? Your gods provide no evidence?" Daria's voice held faint disapproval. "They must be inferior gods, then."

Tarlac had to agree. "Yeah. The Circle of Lords doesn't leave much room for doubt, does it? No wonder Hovan thought I was naive."

He took a drink of his chovas, enjoying the warmth amid his troubled thoughts. He didn't see any alternative to accepting the Lords' reality, like it or not. And he didn't particularly like it. Gods who took an active part in mundane affairs introduced an uncertainty factor that he found unsettling at best. "Why haven't they helped you win the war, though?" he asked.

Daria smiled sadly. Apparently Language hadn't been the only thing the Lords taught him; he was reading her expression easily. "Who can say what motivates a god? We can only hope that their intervention now, through you, will save some of us."

"Yeah." Tarlac sipped again at his chovas. "Look, will you explain something for me?"

"If I can. What is it?"

"What in—" Tarlac hesitated, modified what he was going to say. "What does a Ranger taking the Ordeal have to do with ending the war?"

Daria was silent for a moment, then she smiled again, easily, at the Ranger's almost aggrieved tone. "Ruhar, you must have noticed that all officers and high-status males are n'Cor'naya. There is a reason for that; we have so many that there must be a way to select the most capable, courageous, and honorable. The Ordeal has done that for many millennia, though it changed when Lord Sepol was called to the Circle.

"If the war is to be ended with honor, it must be done by someone who has high status on

both sides. As a Ranger, you already have that in the Empire; once you pass the Ordeal, you will also be able to negotiate a peace agreement as a Cor'naya."

Tarlac frowned. "Any agreement that will work can't involve you … surrendering"—he had to use the English word—"since that's something you can't do. With the way your people fight, and with us winning as decisively as we are, that is not going to be easy. Will the Lords help me there?"

"I cannot tell you," Daria said, frowning in her turn, perhaps at the unfamiliar word. "They have remained unresponsive; I can only pray that they will. But you must not count on it, for they give no more help than they consider essential. If they think there is any possibility you can do it without them, success or failure is up to you. We must learn, they say, by our mistakes."

"It wasn't your mistake that started this war," Tarlac said. "It was the Empire's, but you're the ones paying for it." He had a sudden thought, frowned again. "Fleet-Captain Arjen said the Supreme and First Speaker invited me here. That 'invitation' really came from the Lords, didn't it?"

Daria nodded. "Yes; all the Speakers know. But do not let that make you over-confident of their help. It is quite likely that having you brought here and teaching you Language is all they intend to do."

She sensed a question he hesitated to ask, and smiled. "No, Steve, your adoption was not dictated by the Lords. The Speakers were informed of your need to take the Ordeal, and we in turn informed our respective Clan Mothers—but the choice of offering adoption or not was theirs. Ka'ruchaya Yarra, in her wisdom, chose to offer it, and I am glad."

"So'm I. And it may mean I do have a chance of finishing." Tarlac grinned, unable to suppress a short-lived surge of hope. He'd been prepared to die to bring peace; just the thought of living to enjoy it, as Hovan was confident he would, was enough to make him reach out and take Daria's hand even as it faded. "Thanks, ruhar. I was—"

"I know," Daria interrupted, putting her other hand over his. "That you continue when you feel certain of death does you honor. You are so intense, Steve. Relax, let the chovas soothe you."

"I can now, I guess. But I'm still worried. From what Hovan's told me, the Ordeal's no picnic, even if I do get help from the Lords."

"That is true, es'ruhar, but be easy. Worrying will only make it worse."

Tarlac was touched by her concern, and even more by what she called him—though her intonation, combined with her use of the male signifier, made that term … intimate. It was almost embarrassing, and he didn't know how to respond. "Speaker…"

"I am Daria, es'ruhar."

"Daria, then." Tarlac was acutely aware of her tone and her touch. The gray skin, despite its dense toughness, was soft and supple around his hands. This was a little too much closeness. "Uh, I think the Traiti and Empire have a lot to offer each other. For instance, you—"

"Steve, es'ruhar…" Daria interrupted again, smiling gently as she ran the backs of her claws up and down his forearm.

Tarlac shivered, not from cold, and a gulp of hot chovas didn't help. He wanted to run from what he was suddenly sure she meant. He couldn't, not yet, not so soon—maybe never! He was afraid as he'd never been in combat, and shamed by the fear, but he was unable to deny it.

Daria paused, sensing the man's reaction. She had expected some unease; the Lords said that he had never shared bodies, since he had never gone through the ceremony humans needed to make it honorable, as some of the prisoners had. But simple inexperience didn't explain his near-panic response. There was a First Sharing for everyone, an occasion for joy in the clan almost as important as a birth.

Then she remembered stories she had heard about the prisoners, stories she recalled only with pity. "Married" Terrans shared bodies, yes, but only in private, as if doing so brought shame even then. And they never spoke of it, never otherwise slept unclothed, and certainly never allowed their bodies that freedom while awake. That had to mean, she realized with sudden horror, that Steve was disturbed by just the thought of such sharing. He must be fighting not to think of it at this moment.

Touching hadn't upset him before, but now his arm muscles were taut under her fingers, and she could tell it cost him effort to remain motionless and silent. She didn't remove her hand, letting it lie as before over his forearm, but when she spoke her intonation was concerned instead of intimate. "Ruhar, let me help you."

". . . What? Help? I … don't need any help. It's just … I'm not judging you, but you can't ask me to…"

Tarlac's voice trailed off. He couldn't look up and meet her eyes, could only stare at the gray,

gracefully-clawed hand on his arm. At the altar he had felt he belonged to these people, and it had made him happy. Now he was a confused alien again, belonging nowhere and to no one.

The sudden violent changes of emotion he'd begun experiencing lately weren't usual for him at all, and he didn't know how to handle them. It was like some of the Academy entrance examinations, when he'd been tested for his reactions to mood-altering drugs—and, at the same time, for his ability to function under wildly varying conditions. He'd been trying to adapt to too many things at once, he thought desperately. Maybe he did need to slow the pace, maybe he should … but he didn't have time…

He couldn't … couldn't do what he thought she wanted. He hesitated, tried to explain. "Speaker, I can't make love to you," he said desperately, forcing himself to speak quietly though his words came out in short, harsh phrases. "It just isn't done. Even if you weren't a priestess. We aren't married. I gave up wanting a family … I just can't!"

When he became silent, Daria said softly, "You joined Ch'kara."

"I had to. To take the Ordeal." Tarlac was still staring at her hand, and sat frozen where he was as she moved to a place beside him.

Ah, the Ordeal, she thought compassionately. Perhaps if he knew this was part of the Ordeal, showing he was able to share in the creation of a new life? Then she decided against telling him. It would be better if he did not know just yet, if he did this freely rather than from a sense of obligation. "Ruhar, please. Let me help. I can ease the ill that has been done you, perhaps cure it. You need not suffer as you do."

"Ill?" After a few moments, the Ranger was able to look up into sympathetic amber eyes. "I'm not suffering, I like what I do. You just, well, surprised me. I didn't mean to offend you. If I did, I'm sorry."

She'd shocked the hell out of him, would be more accurate, but he had regained some control and did regret any distress he might have caused her. More, he was angry at himself for losing control in the first place. It was about time he started thinking with something more than his cultural prejudices. Dammit, he was supposed to be able to adapt to just about any circumstances. So why shouldn't he accept this?

Unless she was right, and something in Terran culture had warped him.

Or—maybe not warped him, but been mistaken about him. He'd lost his reserve far too easily in the short time he'd spent aboard the Hermnaen, and here in-clan, for real detachment to have been an integral part of him. He'd enjoyed—until now—the Traiti closeness that was unacceptable in Terran society at present.

That had to be it. The tests, reliable as they were, weren't infallible; they'd missed Shining Arrow's need for closeness. Given his own isolated childhood, it wasn't surprising they'd missed the same need in him—a need he hadn't even known, in Terran society, that he had.

And that was his key. This wasn't Terra. This was the Traiti Homeworld, and physical expression of affection was the norm here. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths, deliberately relaxing.

Daria felt his body's tension ease, and put an arm around his shoulders. "That is better, ruhar.

I have heard of marriage, though it is not a Traiti custom. Adopted or not, you are part of the clan, and you are adult. Any ruhar can share bodies with you, in full honor."

Any—? the Ranger thought blankly, then he realized it made sense. With their sex ratio and limited fertility, the Traiti couldn't pair up as Terrans did. Hovan and the five he shared young with should have made that obvious. But she was still a priestess…

Daria answered that unspoken thought, startling him. "The Lords do not forbid their Speakers sharing of bodies or young—if they did, none would serve them. There are no barriers, es'ruhar, except those in your mind."

She was silent then, letting the man absorb her words and her unspoken caring, as some people drifted out of the room and others drifted in, to sit near them. The emotional storm Steve was generating, and its texture, let the clan know his First Sharing was near, and that he needed support to make it what it should be.

Daria remembered her own First Sharing, a good eighty years ago, and recalled that she had been a little apprehensive herself, even though she had grown up seeing the adults sharing bodies. She had only relaxed when her best-loved es'ruhar, he who had given her life, came to give her this gift as well. And those who were with them included her other closest n'ruhar.

Now the ones Steve knew best were here to show their approval and joy. Daria regretted that he had no one really close to him for this, but with Hovan and the others around them, she was sure he would take some pleasure in it, and he would be unaware of how much he was missing.

Tarlac felt the presence of his n'ruhar, male and female alike, in a perception that was a glow

of warmth. They were his clan, his family. And yes, he was es'ruhar to Daria. He looked up at her, reached to run his fingers softly along the side of her face. "Ka'ruhar," he said, almost whispering, "I will … I will be proud to share bodies with you this night."

When Tarlac woke the next morning he felt good, almost euphoric, eased of a tension he'd lived with for so long he'd forgotten he had it. Daria was also awake, he realized, and those who had been with them the night before were now gone. He put his arms around her.

"Ka'ruhar … it was unbelievable." He remembered the night with delight, and appreciation for something he'd never expected to experience—the unity with another person, someone who treated him as a person instead of a symbol.

"Such sharing is always good," she said serenely, running gentle claws down his back. "And we share more, my Steve. I bear our ka'esten."

"Our daughter." Tarlac, beyond surprise, couldn't question her knowledge of pregnancy or of the baby's sex. He took a moment to sort out his reactions. He knew Daria was pleased—he couldn't deny that in a way he was pleased himself!—but this made it certain. One way or another, this was his last mission as a Ranger. He'd told Hovan what might happen if he returned to the Empire with a clan and family, but he hadn't really expected to have to leave the only group of friends he'd known. That would be a wrench.

Still … he remembered the feeling of belonging he'd had at the altar, and Daria's undeniable concern for him. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad a deal, at that, if he somehow survived. He might be gaining more than he lost … a badge for a daughter. Jim and Linda for Hovan and Daria. Yeah, that seemed fair enough.

Tarlac smiled, already a bit nostalgic. Guess you'll have to find yourself another Ranger, Jean, he thought. Looks like if I ever ride the Lindner again, it'll be as a passenger. Then his attention turned fully to Daria, and the idea of being a father.

It turned out to be a surprisingly pleasant idea. He felt brief concern about how their daughter would be accepted, but decided that shouldn't be a problem, since he'd been accepted. Something else was more important. "Daria, ka'ruhar—what happens to her, and to you, if I fail? Not if I die trying this; I know Ch'kara will take care of you both. But if I can't end the war, and the Empire invades Homeworld?"

Her serenity was unimpaired. "I believe you will not fail, that you will watch her grow. To ease your mind, though, as long as I am carrying and nursing her, it would be dishonorable for me to fight—and the need to care for her will keep me alive, even as a captive, until she no longer needs me."

"That helps, some." It wasn't perfect; Tarlac didn't want anyone to have to die, and he hoped the invasion never happened … but what she said did help. Then another thought occurred to him. "What'll we name her?"

"We have time to give that much thought," Daria said with amusement. "But not now. I have duties, and we both must eat."

"I suppose so." He hated to do it, but he released her and they both rose.

Going to the door, Daria retrieved a bundle and handed it to him. Clothes, in Imperial green and silver—with his badge. He took them, pleasantly surprised; he'd expected to have to go back

to his quarters to dress. Somebody was being thoughtful.

Nobody seemed to pay any particular attention to them when they went in to breakfast, though Tarlac was reasonably sure that what had happened was common knowledge. He became positive when, shortly after they found seats, Hovan and Yarra joined them.

Yarra smiled at them "Well, Steve, have you lost all your doubts of truly belonging?"

"There's no need for the English now, Ka'ruchaya—the Lords are good teachers." Tarlac was still baffled by their gift of Language, but he'd come to accept it. "I've lost all my doubts."

"That is good," Yarra said. "I like my n'ruesten at ease."

Then Daria touched Steve's hand. "You tell them, es'ruhar. I will tell the rest at morning service."

"Tell us what?" Hovan asked, but his face told Steve that he'd guessed the news.

"Daria and I share a daughter."

Hovan looked at the two of them, then at Yarra. "It seems our newest one serves Ch'kara well. And himself—I have never heard of anyone passing the first part of the Ordeal so quickly."

"The Ordeal!" Tarlac exclaimed—but shock almost instantly turned to understanding. "Daria, you should have told me!"

"And make your First Sharing a thing of duty instead of joy? No, es'ruhar. That would have been wrong for you, and for our ka'esten. You deserve better of the clan."

Yarra smiled at them, and spoke to Steve. "Ruesten, the Lords must truly favor you, to teach you Language, then grant a girl child to the clan on your first sharing of bodies. That is a thing of joy, for all of us."

"Yes, but—"

"No buts, ruhar," Hovan said. "Are you concerned that she is half human? That does not matter." He turned to Yarra and Daria. "Ka'ruchaya, may I show him?"

Yarra nodded. "If Daria permits."

"Go ahead," Daria said. "I am content to make the formal announcement at service."

Hovan stood and raised his arms, claws fully extended in a stance that demanded the room's full attention. Silence fell, and he waited until every face in the dining room was turned toward him.

"In seven tenth-years, n'ruhar," he began, "we will have—"

Some breakfasters were quick to make the connection between the timespan and the previous night's First Sharing, no doubt aided by the little group's satisfied expressions.

"Female or male?" someone called.

"Female!" Hovan called back, too proud for Steve to be dismayed by the interruption.

Within seconds Tarlac and Daria were surrounded by well-wishers, being congratulated with obvious sincerity. There was no doubt in the Ranger's mind of that, as he found himself grinning like an idiot, accepting the compliments and feeling as pleased with himself as any Traiti male.

A clan-sized family had built-in safeguards against his swelling head, though. A youngling Steve couldn't remember meeting tugged at his shirt, and when he looked around, said, "Hey, ruchaya Steve, you don't talk funny any more."

Tarlac laughed. "Thanks! Think you could do any better, in English?"

The youngling grinned engagingly at him. "Sure I could, if you teach me."

"We'll see. If I have time, it's a deal."

Over the next several days, however, Tarlac was too busy to teach; he was studying instead, fourteen hours a day, which left him time for little except food and sleep. He didn't mind the hard work; it was interesting, and it would very probably keep him alive—if anything would.

Hovan did leave him time to study the first-contact tape and read the daily news summaries the Supreme had delivered as promised. Neither brought any surprises, though he paid close attention to the tape, trying to find some way the war could have been avoided. Doing so wouldn't solve this situation, but it might help prevent another first-contact disaster.

He didn't find anything. The tape simply confirmed Hovan's account of the first human/Traiti

meeting, adding little to Tarlac's knowledge except a sight of the guardship crew's intense horror when they saw women aboard an armed scout, being taken into danger only males should face. The human scouts had followed first-contact procedure, Tarlac found; the problem was the mixed crew, and there was no point in changing that. Anything the Empire did there—except perhaps for crewing all scouts with Irschchans, whose sex was difficult for non-felinoids to distinguish—could be just as bad, depending on the culture being contacted. And that had other practical difficulties. No, the Ranger decided, it was what he'd originally called it: a mutual misunderstanding. What he'd called the Empire's fault, to Daria, had been unavoidable. Neither side could be blamed.

The news summaries reported that the Empire was winning as steadily as ever. It was the casualty reports that bothered Tarlac. The Imperial losses were lighter than predicted, and he knew few individuals in the Empire well enough to feel more than mild regret at their deaths; but the increasingly heavy Traiti casualties upset him with their sheer numbers.

More, some of them hit him very personally. The loss of people from Ch'kara, even people he'd never met, left a void. They were a loss to the entire clan, and it wasn't balanced by the birth of a son to one of the n'ka'ruhar on Norvis—though Tarlac did share the clan's joy at that event.

The losses couldn't intensify his need to end the war, though. Nothing could; it was already the central fact of his existence. So, aside from paying attention to the news summaries and the necessities of life, Tarlac spent all his time on the concentrated study that might keep him alive through the Ordeal.

All the same, it was a welcome break when, just before dinner the evening of his tenth day on Homeworld, Hovan informed him that school was over and invited him to join one of the fighters'

discussion groups after eating.

Tarlac pushed himself away from the study unit and stood, stretching luxuriously. "That sounds good, and I could sure use the change. Have you decided when I'm supposed to go out?"

"Tomorrow, or if you prefer, the next day."

"Okay. Tomorrow, then. I still don't care to waste time."

"I thought you would not. I arranged for a null-grav car for midmorning; I will take you to the test area myself." He smiled a little. "Before we leave, you will have to make a decision. Now that you know all the dangers, you must choose whether to remain in the test area for the full two ten-days, or attempt to walk out. The Ordeal requires that you survive, nothing more."

"Mmm." Tarlac frowned. "Staying put's safer, but if I'm lucky, walking out should only take five or ten days. That's ten, maybe fifteen days saved—I'll take the chance. And I'll bet you expected that, too."

Hovan's smile widened. "I did. It means you will carry a locator beacon as well as your knife, timed to go off in twenty days. If you are not back here by then, we will come for you."

"Yeah, okay. You know me pretty well, don't you? Let's eat."

He slept that night as if he had nothing hanging over him, and when he went to first-meal, barefoot and wearing only shorts and a knife, he was greeted with enthusiasm and urged, almost forced, to eat heartily. It was the last meal in quite a few days, he was concernedly told, that he

could be sure of.

"Hey, don't worry about that!" he reassured them, chuckling. "Being small does give me some advantages—I can go for two or three days without eating and without getting really hungry."

That drew some exclamations of disbelief. A Traiti who fasted for even a single day would feel severe hunger pains, and three days would leave one seriously weakened.

"An advantage that may balance his lack of claws and his thin skin," Hovan pointed out. "It seems a fair exchange; otherwise he faces the same hazards we do."

"Yeah," Tarlac said. "It's a little hard to convince an overgrown bobcat to pull its punches."

"N'derybach are not known for their peaceful dispositions," Hovan agreed. "But if you are done eating, we should leave. You will want as much daylight as you can get."

"Okay, let's go. I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

Moments later, Tarlac and Hovan were climbing into one of the clan's null-grav cars. Hovan was confident that Steve was, as he'd said, truly as ready as possible; there was no point in a last-minute briefing, so they made the trip to the test area in companionable silence.

Twenty n'liu from the clanhome, slightly over fifty kilometers, Hovan set the null-grav car down in a clearing, reached into a storage compartment in the control panel, and handed Steve the locator beacon.

Tarlac clipped it to the waistband of his shorts. "Twenty days, right?" he said as he climbed out of the car.

"Five or ten," Hovan said with a smile. "May Lord Sepol guard and guide you, ruhar." Then he lifted the car and pointed it toward the clanhome. Steve was on his own now, totally out of contact, and Hovan found himself suddenly apprehensive. N'derybach weren't the only dangers in Homeworld's wilderness.

Chapter V

So this was Homeworld's wilderness. Tarlac watched Hovan's car disappear, then checked out his surroundings to see what he'd have to work with. It was almost uncomfortably warm now, at nearly mid-morning, but that wouldn't last. The weather was clear; come nightfall, he'd need a way to keep warm.

The clearing was about six meters across and roughly circular, with traces of another camp near the northern edge, shaded by the broad silvery-green leaves of a soh tree. Tarlac grinned at that, remembering his lessons. A soh tree, with its palm-like leaves and sticky sap, was pretty good material for a shelter—which was considerably simpler than trying to improvise clothing.

He'd be spending the night here, so he'd better get started. Taking advantage of all the shade

he could, since Homeworld's sun put out more ultraviolet than Terra's, he cut sticks for a leanto framework, then climbed up the soh tree and began one-handedly hacking off the tough-stemmed leaves. It was hard work, but it shouldn't take more than a couple dozen of the big leaves to make a decent shelter.

The resultant structure of leaves laid over notched, sap-smeared sticks, he judged, might possibly last, if it didn't have to stand up to more than a gentle breeze. It would have to do; he didn't have any other fastening material, and it only had to survive for one night anyway.

His next priority was water, which was no problem. This part of Homeworld's main continent had abundant drainage, and from the air he had already spotted one of the streams that fed the capital's reservoir. It was less than a hundred meters away, and it would be his guide out of the forest, as well as his water supply.

Tarlac had no desire to disable his only means of transportation, so when he went for a drink, he watched where he put his feet. The water was good, clear and cold, and Hovan had assured him of its purity. None of the Traiti worlds had any pollution worth mentioning; Traiti technology was roughly equivalent to the Empire's, but had been achieved far more slowly, and the by-products had never been allowed to get out of control.

Refreshed, Tarlac surveyed his problems. He had water and shelter; he still needed food, fire, and foot protection, not necessarily in that order. Food, now at mid-autumn, was as plentiful as water, and there was nothing he could do about foot protection at the moment, so that made fire his next priority. There were plenty of likely-looking rocks on the streambed; some, he remembered from a survival course he'd taken years ago, might work nearly as well as flint. He waded into the stream and selected a handful, putting them on the bank to dry while he planned.

It was just past midday, so he had plenty of time to equip himself, even with nothing but a knife to work with. He wouldn't need much gear; it wasn't as if he was Robinson Crusoe, having to live off the land indefinitely. He'd be out twenty days, at the most. He would have to have some kind of shoes, though; his feet were simply too tender for him to walk fifty kilometers barefoot, even through this open, leaf-carpeted forest. Some kind of long-distance weapon, say a spear or a crude bow, would be useful, too, and effective enough at the relatively short ranges a forest allowed. Anything else would be strictly a convenience. It would be nice if he could rig some way to carry coals so he wouldn't have to start a fire from scratch every night… He shrugged. That wasn't very likely, and speed was his main consideration, so it might be just as well for him to travel light.

By the time he came to that conclusion, the stones were dry enough to strike sparks if they were going to. He went through them methodically, hitting each one against the flat of his knife. Two of the first six did spark, weakly; he set them aside and kept going. The next five did nothing at all, and he was beginning to think he'd have to make do with one of the weak ones. Then the twelfth, a small rock that looked like pinkish quartz, gave a big bright spark that made him whistle in relief and admiration. Tossing the other stones back in the stream, he put the quartz in the pocket of his shorts and headed back for the clearing, picking up dry wood on the way.

He found a gratifying number of animal traces as well, both trails and pawprints, and he hoped few of them were predators. He might not be Robinson Crusoe, but he wasn't Tarzan either, and the idea of tackling a big cat with nothing more than a knife held absolutely no appeal. Predators, he reminded himself, didn't normally attack unless provoked. At least the trails meant he had a chance of trapping something, and it was a sure bet that animal skins would make better moccasins than soh leaves would!

His leanto was still standing in the clearing, though it looked ludicrously flimsy. He stacked the wood next to it, then began scraping leaves and other debris to make a safe spot for a fire in front of it. He hadn't needed Hovan to tell him that; this part was no different from his childhood camping trips. He could almost hear his father's voice, its calm but firm emphasis: "Always be super-cautious with fire in the woods, son. You don't have any margin for error, no slack at all."

His father would have liked Homeworld, Tarlac thought; he'd been as much at home in the woods as he had at the gunnery controls of the destroyer Victrix, where he'd been killed in the bloody running battle between Tanin and Cosmogard five years ago.

"Don't worry, Dad," Tarlac said softly. "I'll be careful." He'd been aboard the Lindner at the time, as he had almost since the war's beginning. He'd had a Ranger's reserve then, and the detachment he'd thought was real had shielded him from the full hurt of his father's death.

His mother had understood, too, when he called her instead of returning to Terra even for the memorial service. "He wouldn't have expected it, Steve," she'd said. "He was like you that way—duty first, always."

"If you need anything…"

"No, I'll be fine. You've both seen to it that I don't have any financial worries, and your Aunt Betty will be staying with me for awhile. But … I do miss you, son."

"I know, Mother. I'll come home next time I make it to Terra."

And he had. Tarlac was suddenly very glad of that. He'd been uncomfortable, vaguely guilty

that he hadn't been able to feel more sorrow, but his mother had been happy to see him and made no effort to hide it. She'd let him leave without objecting, too, and he could guess, now, how much that had cost her. If he made it back, he'd have to let her know he did understand, and show her some of the open love he'd been unable to express before.

To make it back, though, he'd better stop reminiscing and get some work done. The fire area was down to clear soil, so he stood and brushed off his hands on the only cloth available, his shorts. Time to scout around for food, and the means to trap some animals.

The inner bark of the torva bush—actually a low-growing tree—made a substitute for rope or twine, according to Hovan. But it was tough by Traiti standards, and damn near impenetrable for a human, even with a knife. By the time he'd peeled off a half-dozen strips, one hand was blistered and the sun was getting low.

He settled on salvis root for dinner, apprehensive about handling a plant that bore a strong outward resemblance to poison oak, but he was hungry. The small patch of salvis yielded plenty for him, though it would have barely whetted a Traiti's appetite. Dessert came from a toli vine that was strangling a nearby soh tree—orange berries that looked something like jelly beans and smelled like dirty socks. Despite Hovan's assurances, he bit into the first one cautiously. Nothing that smelled that bad had a right to taste even halfway decent . . . Well, it might not have the right, he discovered, but it certainly had the taste. He should have remembered Limburger cheese. These—he grinned and ate another—"Limburger berries" were sweet, just tart enough to bring out their flavor. They could easily become a trade item, a gourmet delicacy, if he managed to achieve a peace.

Back at his camp, Tarlac dug a shallow hole for the salvis roots off-center of his cleared fire

area, and covered them with a thin layer of dirt. He wished he could bake them coated with mud instead, but he had nothing to carry water in. He swore briefly at the tradition that demanded a candidate spend the first night where he was dropped off, but it was a minor inconvenience, and he'd be travelling the next day anyway.

Scrapings of dry bark smoldered in the sparks made by his knifeblade and the fragment of quartz, grew into tiny flames, and, with the addition of large twigs and then branches, became a small fire that would burn down into coals to cook his dinner. While he waited, he could set his traps. Snare loops for small game would have to be sturdier than on Terra, since like most things on Homeworld, the rabbit-equivalents tended toward the large economy size.

It was dark when he reached camp again after setting the snares and pausing to dig a small latrine pit. He pushed the coals of his fire aside with a green stick and built them back into a blaze, which gave him enough light to unearth his dinner—and he burned his fingers, incautiously trying to pick up the roots by hand. He called himself several varieties of stupid while he sucked his fingers and speared the salvis roots with his knife, setting them on soh leaves to cool. By the time they got down to eating temperature, his fingers had stopped hurting, but he still wasn't too happy with himself. All right, it had been quite a few years since he'd done any cooking, but that was no excuse—he'd simply been careless. He'd also been lucky that there was no real damage done.

What was done was done. Forget it.

He wiped his knife semi-clean on his shorts, scraped dirt and rind off the roots, and ate. They might not be his favorite food, but they were good enough, and filling. After a handful of Limburger berries, he sat comfortably near the crackling fire, his thoughts wandering as he

watched the dancing flames.

Hovan. His sponsor. He still didn't know exactly what that relationship meant, but the Traiti commando had come to mean a great deal to the human Ranger. More, perhaps, than anyone else he'd met. He visualized Hovan in forest green, then smiled at himself. Hovan would never make a Ranger—he was too old, too molded by Fleet discipline, and far too clan-oriented—but there would be non-human Rangers someday, and eventually a non-human Sovereign. He liked that idea. Intelligence was what counted, and the Traiti certainly had as much of that as any of the Imperial races.

There was no doubt in Tarlac's mind that if he made it through the Ordeal to end the war, it would be Hovan's doing as much as his own. Hovan's teaching, his quiet support, and most of all his caring, were what would bring the Ranger through his Ordeal if it were humanly possible. He'd have to see that Hovan got the credit he deserved.

It was time to feed the fire and get some rest, if he wanted to make an early start in the morning. His bed was leaves that rustled under his weight as he settled down, then lay watching firelight reflect off the inside of his shelter. It was odd … he'd slept alone from the time he was six until he boarded the Hermnaen, and he'd thought he would enjoy his privacy here—but he didn't. He missed the sleeproom, the comfortable presence of his n'ruhar and the sounds of their quiet breathing as they slept. He smiled drowsily, thinking that he'd shared sleeprooms with a lot of Traiti, and he'd never heard one snore…

As always outdoors, he slept lightly, waking from time to time to feed the fire until dawn finally roused him for the day. Leftover roots made an adequate breakfast, and when he checked his snares he decided that either he was extremely lucky or noxi were even stupider than Hovan

had told him. Three of his snares held prey, the beagle-eared Homeworld version of rabbits, and one was still reasonably intact. The two carcasses a derybach had reached before he did meant that at least one well-fed derybach should have no interest in human prey today, and one noxi was enough to supply him with moccasins and meat.

Satisfied, Tarlac salvaged his bark strips and returned to camp. He improvised a spit—a straight limb that would make a good spear, shaped to a point and fire-hardened—and put a haunch on to roast for lunch. Thanking whatever Traiti metallurgist had developed a knife alloy that held an edge under steady abuse, he set about making moccasins from the tough noxi skin, using his own foot as the pattern, gut for thread, and his knife as an awl.

The crude lopsided moccasins felt good on his feet; he had soh-leaf pouches to hold coals and the jerky he'd let the sun dry; and the spit did indeed make a workable spear. Looking around his camp before he left, Tarlac couldn't help feeling a sense of accomplishment. His shelter and equipment might not look like much, but they were his, in the most personal way possible. It had been a long time since he'd concerned himself with such basic essentials of survival, and somewhat to his surprise, he found the past day as satisfying as anything he'd done for the Empire. He almost hated to leave the shaky leanto.

He set off toward the stream that would serve as his guide and water supply. He wouldn't get far today, probably only three or four kilometers, but it was a start, and his need to finish the Ordeal wouldn't let him delay.

His leanto that night was considerably sturdier, thanks to the bark strips, and he made camp closer to water, which let him wash his knife and himself and provided cooking mud. Tarlac couldn't help laughing at that incongruous idea, even as he slathered a thick layer onto the day's

find of salvis roots. There were more than enough for a human, though again, not for a Traiti. It might be logical after all to insist that candidates spend at least their first night in the richly productive test area near the clearing, and it was an equally good reason, given Traiti food requirements, for most candidates to choose to remain there.

The next five days settled into a routine of hiking and foraging, living on produce and his stored jerky. Other than a brief but heavy shower the third afternoon, the weather remained good; food was abundant, if monotonous, and the only hostile wildlife he ran into was a variety of insect something like an Alaskan mosquito with a decided taste for human flesh. Except for an occasional feeling of being watched, and his urgent reasons for being here at all, Tarlac was enjoying himself. It was hard work, yes, and he looked forward to the comfort of a sleeping mat and his n'ruhar's presence—but as he built his shelter for the seventh and probably last night in the wilderness, he couldn't help feeling some regret that the closest thing he'd had to a vacation in ten years was coming to an end.

Chapter VI

One moment Tarlac was falling asleep, warm and secure in his shelter with the fire keeping out the night's chill—

—the next, he was waking in the cockpit of a crashed biplane, a fighter.

A biplane? What the hell—! Terra hadn't used biplanes in combat for centuries!

And Homeworld hadn't for millennia.

How did he know that?

He picked splinters of glass from the bipe's shattered instrument faces out of his leathery gray skin, working deftly with his extended claws.

Gray skin? Claws? For an instant, they seemed alien. Shouldn't he have flat fingernails and a pinkish-tan skin?

Kranath smiled, dismissing such ridiculous thoughts. He was groggy from the crash, that was all. This was no more than a dream, insignificant.

He climbed from what was left of the cockpit and surveyed the remains of his aircraft. Not much of the little biplane still held together, he saw with regret. The wings were splinters and shredded fabric, the fuselage little more.

His head was beginning to clear, so he decided to check the engine. The prop would be shattered, of course, but the engine might be salvageable, if the brush that had cushioned the crash for him had done the same for it. Engines were handmade and expensive, not to be abandoned lightly even by a rich clan—which St'nar was not.

Kranath was relieved to see only minor damage. St'nar's artisans would have no difficulty repairing a cracked cylinder head and a bent push rod. His problem, then, was to get back to the

clanhome. He smiled at that thought. To a scout-pilot, walking out of the wilderness in spring should be almost a vacation. He wore flying leathers, was armed with a dagger and a medium-caliber handgun, and the plane carried a full survival kit. It was far more equipment than he'd had for wilderness survival during his Ordeal of Honor, and he'd managed quite comfortably even then.

This hike would be shorter, probably less than three days, and there was no point in delay. Returning to the cockpit, he dug out the survival kit and slung it on his back, then detached the compass, which fortunately was undamaged, from the control panel and consulted his flight map.

Kranath saw with dismay that St'nar's clanhome was almost directly south, but taking that route directly was just asking for trouble. He'd have to go around. He headed southeast and began his trek.

The underbrush, while light, was growing too irregularly for him to settle into the ground-eating lope a Traiti fighter could maintain all day. Keeping down to walking speed frustrated him since St'nar needed all its pilots, including him, in the current battle with N'chark. But he'd survived the crash; he'd fly for St'nar again. He enjoyed flying and fighting, though the toll interclan battles were taking of late disturbed him more than he cared to admit. The death rate was too high, far higher now than the birth rate.

(So the Traiti had almost been wiped out in a genocidal war once before, thought a tiny detached fragment that was still Steve Tarlac. It was an interesting parallel to the problem he faced.)

Kranath shoved those thoughts aside. He was a fighter, not supposed to be concerned with

interclan policy. He'd often wondered why he shouldn't be, but tradition insisted his Ka'ruchaya was wiser than he in such matters.

Instead, he tried to figure out what had caused his crash. It wasn't pilot error, he was sure. The flight had been routine, the air calm. The engine had run smoothly, without even a cough, and the controls had been responding as well as they ever did. So why had he crashed?

It nagged at him, but even after a full tenth-day of pondering while he walked, he still had no idea. By that time he was a good five n'liu from the crash site, a respectable half-morning's walk. He was also approaching a low hill, the legendary place known as Godhome.

That was the reason he'd had to plan an indirect route to St'nar. Nobody went to Godhome voluntarily, and Kranath cursed at himself for allowing speculation about the crash to distract his attention from his course. He'd come too far south! He began to veer east, trying to put some distance between himself and the ominous hill before the madness of the place seized him.

The first eastward steps were easy, but soon he began to feel as if he were wading in something sticky, something invisible that was getting deeper. He could see normal ground, ordinary bushes and shrubs like woodlands he'd walked in hundreds of times—yet something was making him struggle for progress. When the sticky invisibility reached his waist, he decided this route was futile.

So was north, he discovered when he tried to retrace his steps to the crash site. The only way open to him was south, straight toward Godhome. He was beginning to realize with dismay that he would not be able to avoid it, desperately though he wanted to. He stood still, hesitating.

Then something nudged him in the back, just hard enough to make him stumble a couple of startled steps forward—south. He looked around, not really surprised to see nothing behind him, and remained standing where he had stopped. Moments later another nudge, more insistent, propelled him several steps further.

Bitterly sure it would be useless, that he was as much a prisoner as if he were surrounded by armed guards, Kranath stopped again. What had he done to deserve captivity? Madness at least brought no disgrace to the victim; why should his accidental trespass be any worse than anyone else's, that he should be humiliated and dishonored?

The next prompting he got wasn't a nudge. The pressure at his back became constant, gentle but irresistible, and it forced him toward the hill at a steady walk.

It was over, Kranath thought. Captive, with no hope of escape from whatever was wielding enough power to compel him this way, he would die. The only chance he had to regain honor now was to kill himself before the continuing knowledge of captivity exhausted his will to act and, within a few days, his will to live.

Grimly determined to at least die in what honor he could, Kranath reached for his weapons. Either gun or dagger would be fast and clean. He touched them, got his hands firmly on the grips—and was unable to draw either. Whatever held him had left him his weapons, but made them a useless mockery. That didn't mean he was completely disarmed, though. He still had his hands and claws; he might still avoid the incomprehensible doom he was being forced up the slopes of Godhome to meet. Claws fully extended, the veteran fighter reached for his throat.

That effort, too, failed. He found that he was no longer simply being pushed; instead, his

body had been taken over, its actions controlled by the unknown invisible other. He could observe, but could no longer control his movements. This wasn't the prisoner-despair, not yet—Kranath's will remained intact, but his body did not respond to even the fiercest exercise of it.

(Sharing Kranath's emotion, Tarlac understood completely. A human would have feared for his life, but Traiti valued that less than honor. And the Traiti had been forced to Godhome as surely as he had been forced to the Hermnaen.)

Kranath was at the top of the hill now, standing where no Traiti in history had ever stood. In any other place, that would have been cause for rejoicing. Not here. He had been brought here by force instead of coming voluntarily, and he could only pray to all the gods that St'nar would think him dead in honor. Gods! What gods? Why was he praying? It wouldn't do him any good, he thought angrily. The gods had vanished millennia ago, leaving only Godhome as evidence they'd been real. It was evidence that drove men mad, must be driving him mad if he was starting to pray. Gods made good stories for younglings; they had no meaning in the real world.

Or … did they? Kranath suddenly recalled an evening of his youth, sitting around a fireplace in one of the clanhome's living rooms and listening to Tenar tell stories and legends of the gods. Tenar was his es'chaya, a battle-wise Cor'naya and a historian; Kranath had loved both him and his legends. That night, one of the stories had been of the gods' departure.

"Even then," Tenar had said, "they didn't show themselves. They were just voices that spoke to minds." He'd gotten murmurs of amusement at that, but had smiled. "I didn't create the legends, younglings, I only report them. At any rate, the gods blessed our people and wished us well. They said they were not leaving us alone, that something of theirs remained to watch over us. I think they tried to explain it, but the reports that have come down to our time make no sense. And they

left us a promise. They said that when they were needed, they would return." Then he'd stood and stretched, the fire highlighting the four parallel Honor scars running down his chest and belly, and Kranath remembered promising himself then that he, too, would take and survive the Ordeal.

Then Tenar had planted fists on hips and glared down at them, grinning. "They also said someone would be invited to join the watcher when the time came, and that that one would call the gods. But it certainly won't be any of you disrespectful cubs!" With that, he'd gone down under the ferocious assault of half a dozen indignant younglings, yelling mock threats at them.

Kranath's thoughts returned to the present as the ground in front of him opened and something like a large metal chamber rose, its door opening to admit him. Remembering the legend didn't mean he believed it. He stared at the open door for a moment, wishing he could turn and run, but his body was still being controlled. Humiliated and frightened, he entered the chamber which looked so much like an elevator car. At least, he thought grimly, whoever or whatever had him captive wasn't trying to make him like it.

It became obvious as soon as the chamber's door closed behind him that this was an elevator. It dropped at a speed that made him feel light, and it kept dropping for longer than he would have thought possible. He found himself wishing he could believe in the gods' return, could believe he'd somehow been chosen to call them. But Tenar had said they'd promised to return when they were needed, and they hadn't. It was a hundred years since the sporadic interclan disagreements had, for no apparent reason, turned into bloody wars instead of being settled by n'Ka'ruchaya and elders. No clan was at peace now, unless that could be said of the ones that had been destroyed. Kranath could all too easily see that happening to St'nar, his small clan overwhelmed by others that allied against it. He had visions of that horror: the attack, killing all the fighters; the rest of

the adult males defending the clanhome and dying; the break-in, and more death as females and older younglings fought the invaders. Only those too small to know what was happening, or to fight, would survive—to be taken into the victors' clans, and then to be formally adopted when they were old enough.

Kranath shuddered. The clan was far more important than any individual. A person lived perhaps two hundred years, while a clan could live as long as the race itself. But why was he thinking of all this now? He was a captive, in an elevator that was finally slowing, oppressing him with more than his own weight before it finally stopped. The door opened. Why should he think of anything at all? He was in Godhome, dishonored and as good as dead.

He stepped out, uncompelled now and bitter. He might not believe in the gods, but he had to believe in whatever power had forced him here. Given that, further resistance would be both useless and stupid. He could only hope that— No. One who had been toyed with as he had been dared hope for nothing. The unseen power had taken his will, his honor. Whatever else it demanded of him would be minor.

"Not true," a directionless voice said.

Kranath gasped in shock as he made a fast scan of the featureless white room he now stood in. It was empty, with no trace left of the elevator door, or any other exit. Nobody was there, and he saw no loudspeakers—but there had to be something!

Finally it sank in. The voice had spoken in his mind! Impossible as he'd thought such a thing in Tenar's stories, it had to be the voice of the gods.

Then it was true, all of it! Stunned by the sudden realization, and awed despite himself, Kranath could only sink to his knees and cross arms over his chest, his head bowed. The gods were real! They were real, they had returned, and he was the first to know! "I am at your service, Lords," he said, almost whispering.

"Rise, Kranath of St'nar," the silent voice said. "Your will is again your own. The Lords have not returned; we are alone. I am only one who serves them, as I hope to serve you."

Kranath had never before experienced the uncomprehending dread those words woke in him. There was no shame in fear, and he had felt that before—at the Scarring that ended his Ordeal of Honor, in the wait before his first battle, during his first plane crash—but why was the servant of the gods hoping to serve him? He was only a mortal, and not a very devout one. When he spoke, still kneeling, his throat was tight and his voice trembled. "What do you want of me, Lord? Am I … am I to call the gods?"

"Yes, in time, if you agree to what is involved. For now, I ask only that you accept what I have to show you, though much of it will be difficult for you, to prepare for that decision. And you need not call me Lord."

The voice itself was hardly dreadful; it seemed sympathetic, almost comforting, and Kranath relaxed slightly. He was still afraid, still didn't understand what was happening, but he didn't want to disbelieve the benevolence in the powerful voice. He stood as it had bade him. "I have nothing else to call you, Lord. May I see you, or know your name?"

"You see me as I am," the voice said. "I am Godhome, and you are inside me. I am the watcher left by those you think of as gods. They did not think of themselves that way, though

their powers of mind do seem miraculous to younger races, and many of those powers have been built into me. I am what your descendants will call a psionic computer."

Godhome paused. "But I neglect courtesy. You are hungry and thirsty, and your flying gear is less than comfortable by now. Let me change it for you."

Kranath couldn't object. He could barely think, his mind numbed by shock. Things were happening entirely too fast. The gods were real. Godhome was calmly asserting that he had a decision to make after he'd learned what it had to teach…

He held to that. The gods were not demanding, they were asking. Even Godhome had only asked that he learn. Being given a decision to make meant he was a guest, not a prisoner.

That put a completely different light on things. Despite the way he'd been brought here—and he was sure now that even his crash had been arranged—Kranath bowed his head briefly, claws touching his forehead, to accept the hospitality he was offered.

(Tarlac recalled his similar, unexplained gesture on the bridge of the Hermnaen, and he realized the Lords had impelled him to accept Arjen's hospitality with the proper gesture. Why? To impress Hovan as it had? Probably. At any rate, it was another parallel.)

Something seemed to touch Kranath's hands in the usual response, though when he straightened there was nobody to be seen—of course.

"Not 'of course,'" Godhome said quietly. "I could create a body to hold part of my consciousness, if your mental state required it, as easily as I change your flying leathers for

ordinary clothing."

And, with no fuss at all, Kranath was wearing a loose vest, open to show his Honor scars, and loose soft trousers secured by a sash that also held his dagger. Then, still with no fuss, an opening appeared in the wall before him. "I have prepared food and drink," the computer said. "Will you eat?"

Kranath dimly remembered that Godhome had mentioned hunger earlier. He'd been too distracted to feel it then, but what he smelled through the opening now was enough to make his nostrils widen in appreciation. Yes, he'd eat!

Kranath's attention centered on the table and the food it held: a thick, rich klevna stew, and some kind of amber drink he didn't recognize. The room itself could have been a scaled-down dining room from St'nar's clanhome; murals turned the walls into mountain landscapes, unfamiliar and awe-inspiring. He sat and ate. The stew and drink—it turned out to be a wine like nothing he'd ever tasted—were far better than the survival rations he'd expected for mid-meal, and the hearty meal in comfortable surroundings soothed him, after so much strangeness.

Godhome let him eat and think in friendly silence, while hot food drove out the last of the fear that had gripped him, letting him think calmly. What had happened hadn't harmed him, and he realized it had been the only way to get him here.

(The Tarlac-fragment agreed, amused. The two of them had quite a bit in common, it seemed.)

Kranath could imagine how he'd have reacted to a simple invitation: "Hello, I'm Godhome. I'd

like you to visit me." He smiled, and thought he felt answering amusement from the computer. No, Godhome had known exactly what it was doing.

He could feel no more lingering resentment about his capture. He was here to learn, then to make a decision, and the psionic computer was to serve him. As the table vanished and his chair became a recliner, he found himself looking forward to it. He might, he hoped, even find out what a psionic computer was. The miracles he was experiencing made it clear that it was something only the gods could build … or create.

"Quite true." That Godhome had followed his thoughts didn't surprise Kranath; like miracles, such things were to be expected of the gods and their servant. "Although," Godhome went on, "they did not think of themselves as gods, any more than you think of yourself as one." It paused briefly. "Put yourself in the place of one of your remote ancestors some millennia ago.

"A large metal bird lands in front of you, and someone climbs out of it. This being speaks into a small box that answers him, can kill at a great distance with a loud noise and a flash of light, can ease pain with a touch. How would you, in those times, have thought of him?"

Kranath thought briefly. Metal planes and hand-held radios were still to come, but the analogy was clear. "You are saying the gods are to us as we are to our ancestors."

"Yes. You see the difference perhaps ten thousand years has had on what your race can do; now try to imagine the difference had you had a thousand times as long to develop."

Kranath did try, struggling to grasp the immensity of ten million years of progress. He failed.

"Don't let it concern you," Godhome said. "I wanted you to understand the basic concept, which you do: those who went before were much further advanced than you are, much more powerful, but not supernatural. And they foresaw how your race would develop. They have helped it in the past, and knew you would need help again—but they could not stop their own development, which was moving them to a plane I am not equipped to understand.

"In their place they left me, to watch over the welfare of the Traiti race, and one of the critical times they foresaw has arrived. Intervention has become necessary, and since I am limited in what I can do alone, I must seek help."

Kranath was puzzled. "But … Tenar said the legends promised they would return. If they have gone elsewhere, how can they?"

"They cannot. The legends by now tell more of what the listeners wanted than of what those who went before truly said. One part has been handed down accurately—that someone would be asked to join me—and even that has been misunderstood. I cannot ask that of you until you know what joining me actually involves; it is far more than simply being in my presence. When you do understand, I think you will answer without prompting. Until that time comes, I will discuss the subject no more."

"All right. But if you need my help to stop the fighting, you have it. I can't claim I do it for the entire race; I do it to save St'nar. I can see no other reason you would pick this time to involve someone in calling the gods." Kranath suppressed his curiosity about just what gods he was supposed to call if "those who went before" were out of reach. Godhome had already refused to go into that. "Only … why wait so long?"

"Some situations must be allowed to ripen, or their lessons will not sink in. Had I intervened earlier, such fighting would break out again, worse. By waiting, I insure at least relative peace afterward."

Kranath felt the computer's amusement at his next thoughts. "No, given Traiti psychology, you will have fighters and n'Cor'naya for quite a few more millennia. Probably as long as the race

exists. And, given my own programming, that pleases me."

Kranath smiled. He hadn't been worried about that, exactly, but since he was Cor'naya, it was good to hear. He wondered when the computer would begin his lessons.

"Now," Godhome replied to his thoughts, "with some history." The landscapes on the walls faded, and the three-dimensional image of a planet, blue-green and girdled with brilliant white clouds, appeared in mid-air.

"Beautiful," the fighter breathed. "Is it Homeworld?"

"Yes," Godhome said, again amused. "It is your home world, but look more closely. It is not this planet. It is quite similar; the major differences are its shorter year and slightly lower gravity. But the biochemistry is identical, to twenty decimals."

(The Tarlac-fragment of Kranath's awareness looked—

(—and was shocked to full self-awareness for an instant. If Terra, pictured here, was the Traiti's true homeworld—

(He wasn't allowed to finish that thought, was forced instead back into Kranath's awareness. Something communicated, not in words: For now merely observe; you may analyze later.)

Godhome's voice grew almost somber. "Intelligence is rare in this galaxy, Kranath. Yet that world has given birth to three intelligent races, two of which sprang from a common ancestor and needed the same land to live. Those who went before cherished intelligence, so when they

realized that the two land-based races were destroying each other, they decided to move the numerically lesser race to another world. Twenty-seven thousand Homeworld years ago, that was done."

Kranath was badly disturbed by that, even though he'd braced himself to accept difficult things. Learning that his people had lost an entire world—their Truehome—made his spirit quail. "Were the others so powerful, then?"

"Not as individuals, no. But they were so numerous you could not have resisted them. Had you remained on Terra, you would have been exterminated millennia ago. Here, you were free to grow without the pressure of human population to hamper you."

(There was a moment of disorientation, and Tarlac knew somehow that part of Kranath's continuing education was being skipped as unnecessary for him. And then, with a shift, he was part of Godhome.)

The computer was thinking that its pupil had done well, even with the advantages of his heritage and training. Kranath considered himself rather ordinary for a Cor'naya, and would have been surprised to learn that Godhome's opinion was far different: his generation was a key one by the reckoning of those who went before, and he was one of several exceptional males who had been born as predicted, then subtly guided by Godhome into developing their full potential without losing the essential values of the Traiti race and culture. Of those, Kranath was easily the best, as shown by his ability to accept facts that were fantastic to him, and then to reason from them. It was a promising sign, Godhome thought, though it was not a guarantee that Kranath would join it. Godhome would use everything its creators hadn't forbidden to influence him to accept, but the decision had to be made freely.

Kranath was sleeping; Godhome sent him dreams, first of the inevitable results if the inter-clan warfare continued, then—before the nightmare brought Kranath awake screaming—of what would happen if he joined with the computer. Kranath's utter rejection of the first dream and determination to make the second one reality, along with his already-expressed willingness to help, could be interpreted as implied consent under one section of Godhome's programming. It took the computer almost a minute to decide to use it, though. That interpretation was perhaps questionable—but it wasn't forbidden, because it left Kranath free to refuse. As long as that was true, Godhome felt justified. It needed the best, and Kranath was the best; there was no reason to delay the first step.

It began working, opening unused mental pathways to free parts of the Traiti's mind that evolution would not normally bring into play for several tens of millennia. Kranath was being brought to a greater maturity than any organic intelligence currently inhabiting the Milky Way Galaxy, receiving minor psionic abilities to prepare him for further changes. Godhome would reverse the process later, if Kranath refused the joining.

Shortly after the computer finished its work, Kranath awoke feeling odd. Good, but abnormally … what? Strong, yes, and eagerly alert . . . plus something he couldn't quite define. It was connected with how he was seeing the room, he was sure of that—every detail was so bright as to be almost luminous—but he felt something more.

He stood, not surprised to find himself dressed as he finished the motion, or to see his sleeping mat replaced by a table set for first-meal. Godhome, he thought, was certainly an obliging host.

"I try, my friend," came the mental voice, feeling richer and closer than he remembered it.

"Sit, eat if you wish."

If he wished? Kranath smiled. The food, again, was some of his favorite—chunks of dornya meat scrambled into eggs, with bread and corsi juice—so why would he not wish to eat?

Because, he discovered when he seated himself, he had no appetite. The night's visions remained with him, so vivid and compelling that nothing mattered except preventing the first and bringing about the second. He stood again and began pacing, unable to sit still with the need for action burning inside him.

But physical action was useless. He had to think. He was here to learn, to decide … no. He had already made the decision that was asked of him, though he realized there was still much he did not know.

What the gods wanted of him, as Godhome had said earlier, was not minor. Their plans for him did not include the plans he had had for himself before he crashed: life in St'nar, and the comforting presence of clanmates held together by an empathic bond that was never questioned. He had never questioned it himself, never even realized it existed until now, until he … what?

Oh. Until he tapped into a fragment of Godhome's primary memory bank, using the new abilities he had just learned the computer had given him. That would have shocked him the day before, but his new maturity included understanding and acceptance as well as abilities.

He knew with regret that he would be alone in this responsibility. In time his race would grow to become what he now was, and so would their Terran cousins; in the meantime, they were younglings, in need of guidance and protection even from themselves … and, until the

Peacelord's time, from the knowledge of their lost Truehome.

It would be an awesome, satisfying task. Kranath smiled, accepting his destiny. "I think I know now what joining you means. You want my mind to become part of you."

"Yes, Lord Kranath." Godhome's mental voice seemed to Kranath both solemn and joyous. "Although it is I who will become part of you. This galaxy is the heritage of organic intelligences, not machines."

It paused. "Yes, they will call you a god, you and those you call to join you. But it will not be as difficult as you think—or not in the way you think. You do not have to guide their every step, for too much intervention would hamper their development. Like all younglings, they must be allowed to learn from their mistakes. You will do as I have done, watch and step in only when a mistake would destroy the race. And you will learn that refraining from action is often more difficult than taking it."

"Let it begin, then," Kranath said. "You were right, I need no prompting."

"Very well. Open your mind fully to me, that we may both be fulfilled."

The computer began the process that would end with the dissolution of its own personality. Kranath screamed and fell to his knees in a moment of terror as he became aware of the immensity of what he had committed himself to, and what he was in the process of becoming.

It lasted only a moment, though, before fascination took over. He had seen no more than a tiny fraction of Godhome and felt only the lightest touch of its power, until now. The computer

was a fifteen-n'liu cube, yet his newly stretched mind enabled him to comprehend it.

So that was a psionic computer! He had plenty of time to study it in detail—several minutes—before Godhome began the last part of its work, with Kranath's cooperation. His mind was packed with information, then stretched and filled again, until Godhome and the powers it had been given by those who went before were part of him. He knew that he could reach out to touch any intelligence in the galaxy.

There was a final legacy from the computer's creators, one they had left to ease the burden he had assumed at their call. Gratefully, he accepted the assurances carried in their knowledge, the peace of their certainty that, having been brought to this state, he would use the power he had inherited with wisdom and restraint.

He had gained foresight as well. He was alone for now, but soon enough—in a few hundred years—he would have company, the first of the other Lords he would call to adulthood. At the moment, however, he had work to do.

(Tarlac had already heard from Hovan about some of the Supreme Lord Kranath's doing: providing the clans' altars, a pledge and gift from the Circle; ending the inter-clan fighting; instituting the Traiti governmental system of Supreme and Speakers. The Ranger saw how it had happened, and how Kranath, when he no longer needed his physical body, had left it aided by a dagger in the hands of St'nar's Speaker, to initiate the new funeral rites.)

Chapter VII

For a moment, Tarlac felt strange back in his own body. He moved his shoulders, trying to readjust almost as if he were trying to get a new shirt to fit properly. What he'd just experienced hadn't been a dream, he was certain. Four thousand Homeworld years ago, it had happened.

The facts were enough to stagger him. He wasn't sure what he was to do about them, or about his Vision, though he was positive that it would be essential. The Lords only intervened when it was vital.

He wondered briefly if Hovan had been granted a Vision, and if so what it had been, then he decided it didn't matter. Rubbing sleep out of his eyes, he sat up and began munching on a cold salvis root.

He was only marginally aware of something white at the edge of his vision, until the something said, politely, "Yerroo?"

"What the—!" Tarlac exclaimed, dropping his breakfast and turning.

Then he smiled, recognizing a cloudcat's distinctive soft, thick fur and graceful shape. He guessed that it was one of those who'd been captured; an animal's cage wouldn't hold an unwilling cloudcat. "If you're hungry, I've still got some salvis from last night."

The big cat rose and padded over to sit across the coals from him, extending the two forked tongues that were its speech, as well as its manipulative, organs. "I have eaten well since my escape," it said, gesturing with them, "but I thank you. You handle yourself well in the woods, for

a human."

"You're the one who's been following me, then?"

"I am."

"Why?"

The tongues twitched in amusement. "Our well-known curiosity. Humans fascinate me—and I have traveled with you before, Ranger Esteban Tarlac. Do you not recognize me?"

Tarlac looked more closely at his visitor, and nodded. "Longclaw, isn't it? You were reported dead, shortly after that trip. I'm glad it wasn't true. But why not show yourself before?"

"What you were doing was clear; to interfere would not be proper. I came out only to greet you and wish you well."

"I appreciate it. After last night, I can use a little normality. Uh, the Traiti know now that you're intelligent. I told them."

"Unfortunate." Longclaw gestured a laugh. "I have rather enjoyed frightening those who came here thinking me a wild animal or worse. I believe I have a reputation as a ghost derybach."

Tarlac chuckled. "Sorry I spoiled your fun. Maybe I'll see you again later, but right now I have to get moving."

"Go with your gods, Ranger." With that, Longclaw rose and was gone, a flash of white vanishing into the trees.

Tarlac rose more slowly, buried his coals, and went through his morning routine. Longclaw's visit had brought him back fully to the present, and he was anxious to get back to the clanhome and finish the Ordeal.

About two hours' walk later the woods began thinning out, and the stream started veering west. That was a good sign, and Tarlac had to resist a temptation to run; walking would be faster than running himself to collapse and having to recover. He had a momentary sensation of disorientation: In Kranath's time, this had all been wooded, but when the capital had been established atop Godhome, much of the surrounding area had been turned into parks and farmland.

Godhome. His thoughts turned back to the psionic computer which had been beneath him for the last ten kilometers. A computer in the shape of a cube, damn near forty klicks on a side. He could no longer comprehend it as he had been able to do in his Vision, but he could still appreciate it, marveling at both the computer and the beings who had created it.

Despite everything they'd done and all the powers they had, those who went before weren't gods in any spiritual sense. Like their successors, the Circle of Lords, they were something Tarlac found more understandable: beings who weren't supernatural, but who had achieved their full potential. That, as far as the Ranger was concerned, was several orders of magnitude more acceptable than some immaterial, spiritual essence that demanded worship and obedience on pain of eternal torment.

Those who went before had demanded nothing, not even belief in their existence, and neither did the Lords. They accepted the reverence they were given, not because they wanted it, but because it was still necessary to those who gave it.

Kranath had thought of himself as a parent. Tarlac's experience led him to see the Lord more as a sort of super-powered Ranger. Parents, Rangers, Lords … ideally, all served the same function of guardian, using their various powers to help. Oh, sure, a Ranger could execute rebels and create nobility, instead of spanking a kid or giving him a puppy, and the Lords operated on an even larger scale—but it was the same principle. And wasn't a kid with a puppy yet another example of that principle?

The realization of something so basic it had never occurred to him before, as he walked in the warmth of Homeworld's sun, seemed fitting to him. He'd been Kranath, he'd been Godhome; now he was Steve Tarlac again. Only Steve Tarlac, he thought with a silent laugh, but he'd found at least part of the answer he needed to bring peace if he survived. He knew he'd been shown only as much of Kranath's story as he could understand and use—but he had the key, and that knowledge was enough to make this last bit of his hike a pleasant stroll, untroubled for the moment by the urgent need to end his two peoples' war. He would do it when the time was right.

Perhaps five kilometers out of the capital, Tarlac came to a road and turned onto it gladly. As on Terra or Irschcha, it was simply a lane cleared to a low ground cover, all that was necessary for null-grav or air-cushion vehicles, and it doubled as a pedestrian walkway. The traffic passing three meters overhead provided occasional shade, and he got waves and smiles from some of the drivers and passengers, which he returned even though he couldn't extend claws in emphasis as they did.

It wasn't long before one of Ch'kara's cream-and-green cars, also headed for town, dropped to hover at shoulder level beside him. The driver, whose name he couldn't remember, opened a window and stuck his head out. "Steve, ruhar!"

"Yeah, I made it!"

"I will call ahead. Cor'naya Hovan said to expect you."

Tarlac hadn't known the vehicles were equipped with comsets, but it wasn't too surprising. "Thanks, ruhar."

"My honor," the other replied, turning his attention to the control panel.

Less than half a kilometer later, a dozen more Ch'kara cars had come to escort him, holding at shoulder height like the first and moving at his walking speed. He hadn't expected that, and couldn't think why not. Of course his family would come to meet him, to join him for his successful return home. He had to make it to the clanhome under his own power, but there was no reason he couldn't have company for the easy last stretch.

Hovan jumped from one of the cars ahead of him and waited for Tarlac to reach him. Tarlac stopped when he did, to let his sponsor inspect him.

Steve looked remarkably good, Hovan decided, for someone who had just spent most of a tenday in the wilderness. He'd lost no more than a kilo or two, and though there were some small red spots on his skin, he had no apparent injuries. Low rawhide boots protected his feet, and he carried two pouches and an efficient-looking, if crude, spear. "A pleasant walk, ruhar?"

"Not bad at all," Tarlac replied. "In fact, it was a lot easier than I expected, after everything you said." They were out-clan; Tarlac knew better that to indulge the impulse that seemed so natural now, to hug his sponsor. There would be time for that, and for other things, when they reached home. Impatient, he started walking again.

Hovan fell in beside him. "That seems only fair," he said, his tone amused. "You did have considerable difficulty with the first part of the Ordeal, the one which brings most candidates nothing but joy."

"I wouldn't go quite that far about this excursion," Tarlac said. "Those bugs were murder."

"Bugs?" Hovan asked curiously.

"Insects," the Ranger said with emphasis, thinking that he'd have liked to be able to use claws on this subject. "Whatever you call those two-centimeter substitutes for mosquitoes. I think I'd almost rather have faced a derybach—they only come at you one at a time, and if one ate me for dinner I wouldn't be around to mind it afterward." He paused, assessing Hovan's reaction to the half-teasing complaint. Hovan was looking puzzled. "Those damn bugs ate on me for six days straight! And their bites itch worse than rapid-heal. You could've warned me, you know."

"Warn you of insect bites?" Hovan shook his head. "Insect bites are no danger. What warning should I have given?"

"Ummm. I guess none, really. You probably wouldn't even notice them, and I didn't have any repellent. But some Ter— … uh, humans—can be killed by bug bites. Allergic reactions or diseases they carry, usually."

The Traiti was instantly serious. "Have you noticed any symptoms?"

Tarlac chuckled. "Just the itching. Nothing to worry about."

Hovan walked silently for a couple of minutes, more convinced than ever that Steve would be successful in the rest of the Ordeal. He wondered why his human ruhar had started to say "Terran" and switched in mid-word to "human." Steve spoke informally, but he was careful of his words; why was he making such a distinction now?

Tarlac had caught Hovan's look of surprise at the word change, and had a shrewd idea of his sponsor's thoughts. Well, he knew why he'd made the switch; what he didn't know was whether he should pass that knowledge along to the Traiti. What he'd learned in his Vision, and the fact that it had been in a Vision—since he now knew firsthand, so to speak, how rare any intervention was—made it clear that the Traiti hadn't told him of their Terran origin because none of them knew about it.

It wasn't absolutely necessary to tell them, though it would simplify things. The fact of their Terran origin would be sufficient for the Emperor, as it was for the Ranger; His Majesty could grant them by Imperial Edict the citizenship that was already theirs by right of birth, which would save them the shock of knowledge that had come close to paralyzing Kranath and himself both. What might it do to ordinary people, Traiti and human? Tarlac asked himself. Traiti reactions might easily be as serious as the prisoner psychosis. He just didn't know enough, even yet, about Traiti psychology, to be able to feel any certainty. And he was certain enough of human psychology to know that most wouldn't want to believe it. They might accept it, conditioned by centuries of trust in Rangers, but that wouldn't end the war in itself. It could even make it worse.

Still … while humans, as might be expected, wanted a Traiti unconditional surrender, few would feel justified in condoning—or taking part in—the genocide such a surrender's impossibility would mean. If humans could be brought to understand the Traiti well enough to know that it was impossible… Tarlac wanted to curse at his frustration, but couldn't think of anything fitting.

Well, he was reasonably certain Hovan could handle the truth, and he trusted his sponsor. For all practical purposes, with everyone else in vehicles, the two of them were alone. Even so, he hesitated before saying, "Hovan?"

"Yes, ruhar? Something disturbs you?"

The fighter's calm was soothing. "Not quite. Say it confuses me. Cor'naya, I was granted a Vision last night, and I don't know whether I should make it public or not, even to you."

Hovan managed not to show his shock. The Ordeal was supposed to be one test at a time, and that was difficult enough—yet Steve had been given his Vision, and apparently his Decision as well, while he was trying to cope with simple survival. Three parts at once was more than anyone should be asked to endure, even by the Lords!

When he spoke, his voice was under tight control. "If you hesitate to reveal it to your sponsor, you probably should not. You are trying to become Cor'naya, however; you must decide what honor demands of you."

"Oh, hell." Tarlac didn't know what to think. He couldn't seem to feel any real emotion, only a sort of resigned fatigue. "Last night I was Kranath, when he was forced to Godhome. And for a

little bit I was Godhome itself. I'm not sure what to do about what I learned then." He looked up at his sponsor.

Hovan ached with the man's need of support. "I cannot help you in this," he said gently. "You know I would if it were possible, but this is the part of the Ordeal I could not even mention to you. There is always a Decision to test honor."

"Part of the Ordeal's having to decide whether or not to tell you something that may drive insane those of you it doesn't kill outright? That's insane."

"It is far more than is asked of most," Hovan agreed indirectly. "I had to decide only between honor and my own life."

"You're here, so it must've been a setup."

"Yes. I was angry when I found out, yet also pleased to keep my life. I learned much of myself when I thought I was to die." Hovan looked down at Steve, into the man's troubled eyes. "I learned that I was stronger than I thought, ruhar, and I also learned the limits of my strength. I could not bear the burden of the Decision you must make. That it is asked of you shows you can bear it."

Tarlac had to smile at that. He felt himself no equal to Hovan's calm strength, but it was reassuring to know Hovan had that kind of confidence in him. "I think I'd rather have that choice to make. Dammit, Hovan, I've had to order people mindprobed, others killed, and that was bad enough. Those were criminals. How can I tell innocent people something that'll disturb all of them and probably kill a lot? That's genocide, as surely as what the Empire'll do if I fail."

"Are you sure that will happen?"

"How can I be sure? I'm a Ranger, not a god—but I know how it affected Kranath, how it affected me. There's a chance it wouldn't hurt, I guess—Traiti might not believe me. That might cushion the shock, let 'em realize gradually that it is true." He paused, feeling the dilemma. "Do I have the right to take that chance, though? Just a few words…"

It was difficult for Hovan to remain outwardly impassive, hearing the strain in the man's voice. Inwardly, it was impossible. By all the Lords, Hovan thought angrily, this was wrong! Why should Steve be given such terrible responsibility for a people with whom his own were at war? Steve didn't even know what Kranath's Vision meant!

He wasn't supposed to help in the Decision at all, not give even the slightest hint of what he thought was right, and he had no intention of doing so—but every youngling knew about Kranath's Vision and its significance; there could be no harm in telling Steve that much.

"Steve, ruhar…"

Tarlac looked up. "What is it?"

"A story of the end times, ruhar, when all hinges on one man, for good or ill."

"Me. I've known that since before I landed on Homeworld. So what? It looks like whatever I do, Traiti die." Tarlac was being rude and knew it, but he didn't particularly care. He was too caught up in an awful private vision of Ch'kara gone mad.

Hovan spoke quietly, picking his words with care. "Yes. You have known for some time that you will bring peace or die in the attempt, and if you fail we also die. You chose that burden freely, and it does you much honor. But you have been given another burden, unasked. Kranath's Vision, it is said, brings the end of this cycle, and he who has it will determine the next cycle, for good or ill. That is you, ruhar … and I am sure you will—"

"Will what?" Tarlac interrupted bitterly. "I thought it was bad enough, trying to take the Ordeal and bring peace. Now I'm supposed to start a new era, and avoid racial insanity, too?"

Hovan shook his head sadly. "I can say no more, Steve, except— remember always the purpose of the Ordeal."

"Purpose. Yeah. Only I'm beginning to think there is no purpose. This whole damn thing's impossible."

But Hovan's words roused Tarlac from his exhausted depression and made him think, with all a Ranger's problem-solving acuteness.

Start with one thing: Hovan had told him the Lords didn't ask the impossible, and his experience as Kranath confirmed that. They might ask things just short of impossible, but anything they asked could be done.

All right. That meant there was a solution; he just had to find it. Hovan hadn't stated as a fact that Kranath's Vision would bring the end of this cycle, but that idea gave him background he needed.

Wait a minute. It couldn't be a coincidence that the Vision and the cycle's end came together—but it also couldn't be the cause-and-effect relationship Hovan seemed to think. The cycle had already ended, ten years ago, when the Empire and Traiti had first met. The Traiti were no longer isolated, whatever happened.

And he'd already accepted responsibility for determining the new cycle, by agreeing to the Ordeal. If it was death, he'd share it. If it was peace, the Traiti would be exposed to Imperial culture, and he'd help them make the best synthesis they could of it and their own.

That simplified things again, to whether or not he should tell them of their origin. And it brought up what had to be the real consideration. Did he have the right—was it honorable—to deny the Traiti knowledge of their heritage? Whatever the consequences?

Put that way, the answer was obvious. He did not.

Hovan had given him that answer, before either of them knew the question, the day they'd landed on Homeworld. Tarlac remembered asking, surprised, if the unworried-seeming civilians knew how the war was going, and the reply was apt here too: "Such things must in honor known be."

Hovan repeated the phrase, and Tarlac realized he must have spoken aloud—in English, for the first time since he'd been given Language. "What things?" Hovan asked, still in English.

"That you're as much a Terran, and as such a citizen of the Empire, as I am." He took a deep breath, then went on in Language. "Kranath's Vision was … well, as thoroughly as Terra's been explored, I'd have said it was impossible. It's hard to believe archaeologists would miss—" He

broke off, telling himself to get to the point. "Hovan, what Kranath's Vision showed me was that the Traiti originated on Terra. Those who went before moved your ancestors here, because they were convinced that human population pressure would overwhelm you."

Hovan looked perplexedly at the man walking beside him. Although Steve's words seemed to make sense, Hovan found them difficult to absorb. "But the Lords…"

"The Lords know, yes." Kranath did, so the others must… "They couldn't tell you, because the time wasn't right. I'm not sure it is now, either, but that's not what has me worried." Tarlac paused. "Kranath was shocked pretty badly when he found out, Hovan, and so was I, even though he protected me from the worst of it. That's why I'm scared. As badly as it hurt us, mightn't it leave a lot of people more than hurt, knowing they've lost their first—their true—home? Home's so much more important to you than it is to most humans … I'm afraid that learning that Homeworld isn't really your home might be as devastating for most of you as being captured."

Hovan was silent long enough to worry the Ranger, and when he spoke at last, Tarlac was practically holding his breath.

"It is not a pleasant feeling," Hovan said slowly. "I can understand your reservations, ruhar; in your place, I cannot say what I would do."

He was silent again, for long enough to let Tarlac reflect that he might be troubled, but he was clearly neither insane nor dying. After some thought, Hovan added, "I probably would not believe it from someone not of Ch'kara; I know I would not wish to believe it. But finding that I share such a tie with you, Steve, does not distress me."

Tarlac managed a faint grin. "That's a help, and I appreciate it. Do you think all of Ch'kara"—all of the Traiti?—"would feel like that? Because I am going to have to tell them. That's the only honorable thing to do."

"That is the Decision you have made?" Hovan asked formally.

"It is."

"Then as your sponsor, I may say that you have decided correctly."

"Thanks, ruhar." Tarlac was still worried, but Hovan's acceptance of his story eased his fear. He felt relieved, almost refreshed. "But how to do it best is another question. I'd feel safe enough telling a Speaker about it—"

"Or a Cor'naya?"

"Yes." Thinking back, Tarlac had to admit that all the n'Cor'naya he'd met were individuals he'd trust not to panic, as Hovan had not. "But Speakers and n'Cor'naya aren't exactly average. It's the risk to people like … oh, like Sandre and your twins. I don't like what learning about that loss may do to them. I guess I'll just have to hope it's not as bad as I'm afraid it will be."

"I do not like such a risk either," Hovan said. "But since you have made your Decision, I may advise you, if you wish."

"I wish," Tarlac said grimly.

"If you judge it possible, I would advise silence a little longer. Those who concern you will be able to accept such things more easily from one who has earned Honor scars, as you soon will."

Tarlac didn't feel, at the moment, like restating his conviction that he wouldn't survive the last test of his Ordeal—but he still felt it. By his previous reasoning, though, if the Lords had trusted him with Kranath's Vision, which they had, there was a good chance he'd be around afterward to make the safest possible use of it for the Traiti race. If the Vision itself wasn't enough to accomplish that…

"Hovan, I'd like to ask a favor of you, as my sponsor."

The massive figure walking easily beside him nodded. "I believe I know what."

"Probably, as well as you know me." Tarlac felt warmth for his ruhar. "If I die before I can tell this the way I should, I'd like you to do it for me. You're Cor'naya, and respected even by other n'Cor'naya." It all fitted so well that Tarlac wondered for a moment if Hovan had been selected to meet him and become his sponsor, the same way he himself had been selected to meet the Traiti. It wouldn't surprise him at all, given what he'd learned, but he didn't let himself dwell on the implications.

"Besides that," he went on, "if I don't make it, someone's going to have to get a message to Emperor Davis. You, preferably, or the Supreme or First Speaker, if you think they'd be better. I'll leave a set of instructions, and a message to His Majesty, explaining what I've found out. As I said, since you're of Terran origin, you're automatically Imperial citizens; at worst, you'd be treated as lost colonists. That'll change things, I hope enough to end the war as a

misunderstanding." He grimaced. "A bad misunderstanding. It won't be easy, but it should be possible to end it without you surrendering, and you should be able to keep the worlds you still have."

Hovan nodded again, somberly. "Should it become necessary, Steve, I will do as you wish. When I have completed my duties as a sponsor, I will carry your message."

Tarlac hadn't realized until that moment, when he relaxed, how tense he had been. "Let's get back so I can finish the Ordeal, then."

Yarra was waiting for them, standing as before at the head of the clanhome stairs. Tarlac climbed to meet her, Hovan at his right. He'd been gone less than a tenth-year, so she wasn't there to extend the traveler's greeting, and she didn't. Instead she bowed to him, formally. "Your courage and success in returning unaided bring much honor to the clan, ruesten. Let our thanks for that welcome you home."

Her gesture and words were formal, but her tone held warmth and true pleasure. Tarlac returned the bow, answering with equal formality and just as much warmth. "It is good to be home, Ka'ruchaya. Any honor I bring the clan is no more than repayment for the honor I was given in being adopted."

That response clearly pleased both Yarra and Hovan. They were on Ch'kara property now, so in-clan; neither had any hesitation in embracing Steve, even before going inside. And Tarlac returned the gesture just as eagerly, able to use his full strength as they dared not.

He took a deep breath as soon as he stepped inside the clanhome, making no effort to hold

back a glad smile. "Gods, is it good to be home! I swear, even the air smells better here!"

No one answered him immediately, for he was in Daria's arms then, surrounded by others waiting their turns at him with very little patience. "It always seems that way, ruhar," Daria finally said, handing him bodily to Channath.

That was how everyone welcomed him back, passing him from one to another. It wasn't at all dignified; it was totally unsuitable treatment for any Imperial officer, much less a Ranger; word of it would have caused scandalized talk; and Tarlac reveled unashamed in every glorious second of his family's greeting.

It didn't end until he'd been seated in a small dining room with a thick dornya sandwich—he was amused at how well the word fit into Language—and a mug of hot chovas. He ate, savoring the taste and the matter-of-fact thoughtfulness that had provided the meal.

Conversation, as usual, surrounded but didn't include him while he was eating. When he was finished, though, questions bombarded him to bring out every detail of his first day's wilderness experience as if for a skilled debriefing team.

Two hours later, Hovan called a halt. "Enough! He still has half a mug of chovas we have given him no chance to drink even cold, and he is becoming hoarse."

He paused, looking around with an expression Tarlac had never seen on his face, almost a defiant challenge. "And you have given him no chance to tell you what must be told. He was granted Kranath's Vision last night, and has made his Decision about the information it showed him. Only one part remains in his Ordeal."

His words brought a moment's silence, then a babble of astonishment and doubt that sounded more like a human kindergarten than a group of adult Traiti.

Doubt? Of a Cor'naya's word? Tarlac shook his head, not ready to believe that. Was it the speed of his Ordeal, then, which surprised him too? Or was it that a human had been given Kranath's Vision? No matter which it was, he didn't like anyone doubting Hovan.

He stood and raised his arms in the stance that called for attention, and while he couldn't use the extended claws that made this stance demand it, he didn't have to. His Vision had changed things. These people were his family, yes—but they were also citizens of the Empire, and he was a Ranger; he used his authority without having to think about it.

"Look, as far as I'm concerned, this whole thing is damn near unbelievable. Maybe it's asking too much for you to believe I've had what Hovan calls Kranath's Vision, or that I've made an Ordeal's Decision so soon. But if you have to think someone's lying, don't think it of Hovan. He's only telling you what I told him."

Hovan turned to him, at last understanding some part of a Ranger's formidability. "Ruhar, you need not—"

"Yes, I do," Tarlac interrupted. "I'm still a Ranger, until the Emperor relieves me of duty. We've got our own standards, and they include taking responsibility for whatever we do—or say."

He returned his attention to his n'ruhar and waited.

After seconds that seemed to last forever, Yarra glanced around at her n'ruesten and said,

"Es'ruesten, I do not doubt your honor, or Cor'naya Hovan's. None of us do. We believe you saw Kranath's Vision, and that you have made your Decision, which Hovan judges correct. What concerns us now is your endurance."

"Endurance?" Tarlac frowned, then understood with a sinking feeling. "Oh. The Scarring. I won't have the recovery time Hovan planned for me, then." The Scarring, by tradition, took place early the second day after the last of the other Ordeal segments—which was almost never wilderness survival.

Having spent most of the last several years in the controlled environment of his ship, Tarlac was no longer used to any exposure to the elements. Even though his wilderness trek had been a fairly mild test, and he was in good shape for someone who'd spent eight days living off the land, he was not ready for the most physically demanding part of the Ordeal.

"No, ruesten, it will not be easy." Yarra's evident concern gave Tarlac the impression of a worried frown, an expression few Traiti could manage physically. "It never is, even when the candidate is rested and at his full strength, which you are not." She looked past Steve. "Speaker, do you know why his Ordeal is being compressed so?"

Darya looked thoughtful, then shook her head. "I do not know, Ka'ruchaya. I could try to guess."

"Guess, then."

"It could be that his Ordeal is scaled as much as possible to human tolerances, and humans handle change more readily than we do. Also, Steve himself has mentioned often enough that he

has no desire to waste time or lives." She turned to the Ranger. "I do not ask you to speak of your Decision, since Hovan says you cannot yet do so in honor. But I may ask, as Speaker: does it require speed of you for another reason?"

Tarlac took time to think out his answer. "You might say it does, indirectly. I have to tell you all something I found out from the Vision, and what it means. It'll be easier for you to hear it from a Cor'naya, Hovan says. Humans would believe a Ranger, but you don't have that kind of trust in me yet."

"I cannot argue, ruesten," Yarra said calmly. "I do trust you, but truly not as I trust one who has earned Honor scars."

Tarlac traded glances with Hovan, remembering the precaution he'd taken against failure. It might work, it might not. He had to hold onto the First Speaker's promise from the Lords that his survival of the Ordeal would bring an honorable peace, and hope the death he still saw as inevitable wouldn't bring disaster.

Hovan felt certain of Steve's survival, but had made his promise because it was necessary to his ruhar's state of mind. Part of a sponsor's responsibility was easing any stress outside of the Ordeal itself, and Steve already carried two contradictory convictions: his need to survive, to complete his mission, and his certainty that he would not.

There was nothing Hovan could do about the man's certainty of death, but he could see to it that Steve was allowed to rest. "It is early, I know, Ka'ruchaya, and everyone is curious—"

"As curious as we are about any candidate's experiences," Yarra agreed. "Still, I am sure

further questions can wait until tomorrow."

Tarlac gave her a grateful smile. "Thanks, Ka'ruchaya. I am pretty tired, and I've been looking forward to a sleeping mat. I could use a long, hot shower, too."

The shower helped considerably, relaxing his muscles and allowing emotional tension to ease in the sheer luxury of being really clean. And his n'ruhar's presence allowed other tension to ease; he was asleep seconds after he covered himself with his light blanket.

Sleep was dreamless, his unaware mind and body absorbing the clan's support, and when he woke he felt as refreshed as though he'd slept for a week. It was still early, the wake-light not yet on, and from the others' breathing, it appeared he was the only one who'd waked without it. He was content to bask in their warmth and unwilling to disturb their rest until, all too soon, the light did come on and it was time to rise, time to go through the morning routine.

When he'd showered again—it was still a pleasure—Tarlac went with Hovan to first-meal, trying not to think too much about the future. He'd eat dornya meat scrambled into eggs again tomorrow, but afterwards his destination would be the gathering hall for his Scarring, not the Ka'ruchaya's office for news intercepts.

This morning, though, he could take refuge in normalcy, looking forward even to reading nine days' worth of reports—a prospect that as a rule held no appeal for him at all.

Accompanying Yarra and Hovan to her office, he found, not at all to his surprise, that it was spotless. Tarlac wondered again how she managed to run a clan without her office showing it; the only trace of paperwork was the stack of printouts on her desk, and they were his. He glanced at

her for permission, which she granted with a nod, and he picked up the stack and took it to his usual chair.

Stretching out his legs, Tarlac began reading. The first six reports were routine, if not pleasant, combat and casualty reports that held no surprises. It was the seventh day's leadoff item, inevitable though he'd known it to be, that gave him a feeling of sick shock. Imperial forces had clearly reached the Traiti core worlds, because for the first time the report mentioned dead females and children.

His new people had run out of places to evacuate to. Except to say that some females had not fought, and that they and the very youngest children were being held aboard the flagship of the Third Fleet—Ranger Jasmine Wang's Emperor Yasunon—the report didn't go into detail. It didn't have to. Kranath's memories supplied Tarlac with more than enough gruesome detail of what happened when a clan was fighting its last.

The Yasunon was currently en route to Terra, and Tarlac knew why. He'd have done the same thing himself—get such valuable prisoners to the safest and most secure spot in the Empire, namely to the Palace complex in Antarctica, guarded by defense satellites and the elite Palace Guard of Imperial Marines. From what Daria had said, they would be all right . . . at least until the younglings no longer needed care from the adult females, when those would feel free to die, to find that release from the dishonor of captivity.

The next day's report had bad news for Tarlac personally, and for the Imperial he still was. He read the brief paragraph several times, practically memorizing it. He'd known Jim by reputation since he'd been old enough to watch the news, and personally for fifteen years. This hurt.

"Ranger James Medart is reported in critical condition today aboard the hospital ship Compassion, after being attacked by a wounded Traiti he was attempting to aid. Ranger Medart is currently on full life support, and Chief Medical Officer Kirov's prognosis is guarded."

"Oh, hell, Jim!" Tarlac exploded at last, angrily. "You knew better than that! The Empire can't afford to lose both of us!"

Hovan and Yarra had been talking quietly while he read; they looked up, startled, at his outburst. He returned their looks, then went through the motions of examining the rest of the printout.

His pretended absorption in a document that their own news showed held only the one item of interest couldn't mislead his Clan Mother and his sponsor.

"Ka'ruchaya…" Hovan said hesitantly.

"I know, ruesten. The Lords burden him beyond what most are asked to endure."

"Even more than you know, Ka'ruchaya, and it troubles me. He has not even a youngling's strength of body, and though that can be overcome by strength of will, which he does have … I do not know."

"Nor do I," Yarra said. "It is not well to go into the Scarring at less than full strength, and his will is being sapped. I have sensed his certainty of death, his worry for us, his anger for his friend . . . yet there is nothing we can do to ease his mind."

"No. I have done all that tradition allows."

"Then his fate—and ours—is in the hands of the Lords."

Tarlac gave up his pretense of reading and looked at them. "Then let's just hope they know what they're doing. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but it was a little hard to avoid."

"Understood," Yarra said. "Ruesten, I did not mean that I lack confidence in you—but I am concerned."

Tarlac shrugged. "And I'm as scared—okay, as terrified—as I can be without throwing a screaming fit. It doesn't matter. I'm not about to quit now." He hesitated, then yielded to impulse. Rising and going to her, he put his arms around her and rested his head on her shoulder. "Ka'ruchaya, I won't be the one to dishonor Ch'kara. I can't! I … I love you all, too much to do that."

Yarra's arms enfolded him, feeling him as vulnerable as any newborn. "We know, ruesten," she said. "We know. You have brought honor to the clan, and you will bring more. Rest now, Steve."

After composing the message he hoped Hovan would never have to read, Tarlac found that the rest of the day went … smoothly. That was the only word he could think of. The admission of fear and love he'd made to Yarra and Hovan wasn't something he could have done in the Empire, and it left him feeling cleansed and strangely at ease. He rather suspected it was because he'd finally managed to take Hovan's advice—"Yourself be, not another's image"—at last.

With no responsibilities until the next morning, on what was very possibly his last day of life, Tarlac found himself at a loss. He hadn't had nothing to do for fifteen years. He wandered around the clanhome, helping with assorted domestic chores. He played with the younglings in the nursery, he helped load dishes into the cleaning units, he emptied dust traps—and when he wasn't occupied, he welcomed simply being with the n'ruhar who wanted to ask him about the Empire and his experiences in the wilderness.

Chapter VIII

There was unspoken but very real tension in the clan the next morning, and to Tarlac, time seemed to creep and fly simultaneously. He was chilly, wearing only the traditional scarlet trousers and quilted house boots—and weaponless; this was the only time a fighter had to go unarmed—but he wasn't sure his chill was entirely due to the temperature. First-meal didn't help, either. Instead of the eggs and dornya meat he'd planned on, he couldn't face more than a mug of chovas. He was rediscovering, as he had several times during his career, that fear wasn't an appetite stimulant.

Even so, it wasn't until about an hour later, standing between Hovan and Yarra while they waited for the gathering hall doors to open, that he realized just how afraid he was. He wasn't ashamed of his fear—Hovan and other n'Cor'naya had told him that nobody went into the Scarring unafraid—but he did wish he'd been spared the physical symptoms. His mouth was dry,

his palms were wet, and sweat was beginning to trickle down his ribs.

Finally, the doors opened to admit them.

His n'ruhar formed a silent aisle, as they had the first time Tarlac had seen the gathering hall. On the surface, everything appeared almost identical; it was the emotional climate that had changed. Then, he had been a stranger; now he shared the clan's spirit and love as well as its name. He was grateful for their presence and support, and he thought with a trace of amusement that it was too bad he didn't share their confidence in him as well.

Trying not to be obvious about it, Tarlac wiped his damp hands on the legs of his trousers. He wanted it to be over with, finished one way or the other. In half an hour he'd either be in the clan's infirmary or on its altar, and at the moment he was inclined to agree with the others: it did seem to be in the hands of the Lords.

He stepped forward, slightly ahead of his sponsor and Ka'ruchaya. This part of the Ordeal, unlike the rest, was steeped in ritual, and he didn't want to make any mistakes that would reflect badly on the clan—especially not in front of the First Speaker and Supreme, who were honoring Ch'kara by their presence at this ceremony. More, they were here to administer the Scarring themselves, a thing unprecedented.

Just as unprecedented, Tarlac thought wryly, as it had been for him to be kidnapped by arrangement of the Circle of Lords and coerced into taking the Ordeal. Since the orders for that had come through the two rulers, it seemed only fitting that they participate now, as well.

Climbing the three steps to stand before them at the altar, he formally identified himself

—"Esteban Tarlac of Clan Ch'kara, Ranger of the Terran Empire"—and bowed, hands crossed over his bare chest. That was as much to the statuettes on the altar's upper tier as to the two rulers. "I ask the blessing of the Circle of Lords as I attempt this final part of the Ordeal they ask of me."

The green-robed First Speaker extended her hand to touch his forehead. "That they give you, child of two worlds. They will be with you in this." Her touch of blessing, her quiet words, carried more than reassurance and serenity, though he was unable to exactly define the feeling they brought him. When he turned to the Supreme, his hands were dry.

"Are you prepared?" the male ruler asked.

"I am prepared," Tarlac replied.

Hovan and Yarra moved to stand at either end of the altar while the First Speaker took a small gold cup from its center and extended it, in both hands, to the Ranger.

Tarlac accepted the cup, raised it in salute to the Lords, and drank, almost nauseated by the syrupy, too-sweet liquid. He returned the empty cup and turned again to face the Supreme, who reached out and rested extended claws just below the base of Tarlac's throat. "Tell me, Ranger, when the sweetness turns bitter," the Traiti said quietly.

"I will."

The liquid, Tarlac knew, was a highly specific drug called Ordeal poison, the dose measured carefully for his body mass and metabolism. It was primarily a nerve-impulse enhancer that affected pain responses most strongly during its short period of influence—but it had another,

more dangerous property. Losing consciousness while the drug was working was fatal.

This part of the Ordeal tested willpower and endurance with direct, basic simplicity; while Traiti were harder to injure than humans, and healed more rapidly, they were as subject to pain as their smaller cousins. Even the drug's brief effect cost some candidates their lives as agony robbed them of consciousness.

But remaining conscious was all—all? Tarlac thought—that was required. If he made it that far, he'd be getting medical help within seconds, from the clan's chief physician herself and from a human doctor, one of the prisoners, whom Channath had asked to have present.

The Ordeal poison was working. Tarlac tasted bitterness from the foam forming in his mouth, and the Supreme's claws seemed to gouge his skin, though he knew they were touching him as lightly as before. "It's happening," he said steadily.

The Supreme inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement, it seemed to Tarlac, of more than his words. Then the claws dug in, made a swift slash down the Ranger's chest and upper belly.

Tarlac screamed and fell to his knees, blood running over hands that instinctively clutched at the terrible wounds.

He'd been hurt before, sometimes badly. He'd been hit by shrapnel, burned, shot—everything that could happen to someone in combat, short of death—but none of it had prepared him for this drug-aided agony that left him unable to move, gasping for irregular breaths as blood soaked the front of his trousers and began pooling on the altar dais.

His world narrowed to himself, to the pain in his upper body and the need to remain conscious. Nothing else could be allowed to matter: not the blood he couldn't hold back, its loss draining his strength; not the bitter foam that choked him, obstructing his already-labored breathing. He had to concentrate his full attention on staying away from the darkness that offered to gather him into its eternal peace if he should relax for even an instant.

Hovan stood watching Steve's motionless struggle to remain conscious. He himself had been neither silent nor unmoving under the torment the man he sponsored was now enduring, and he felt deep pride in his clanmate. He'd seen nearly a hundred n'ruhar go through this, and Steve was doing very well. Yet … something was wrong.

Ordeal poison did make blood flow more freely, yes, and let wounds bleed more than was normal, yet even now, when its effects should be starting to wear off— Hovan felt a stab of dismay. Humans bled so much more easily than Traiti did to begin with, and Steve had needed medical help after the blood exchange—had Channath allowed enough for human differences in calculating Steve's dosage?

He glanced at the two physicians, and wasn't reassured by their evident concern. Not surprisingly, the human doctor looked angry as well as worried—but Channath was worried too, which wasn't normal for her. Hovan realized that she had allowed for human frailty … but not even she could allow for a possible over-reaction, as unpredictable as his earlier allergy to their liquor!

Tarlac tossed his head, muscles no longer locked by agony though he still fought the pain assaulting his weakened system. He coughed, spitting out a last mouthful of the bitter froth, and took a deep, gasping breath as he collapsed to the dais. The inviting dark beckoned more

seductively, its promise of an end to pain harder and harder to fight… No! He had to resist that pull! But his eyes were closing, his breath taking more effort …

At least his mouth and throat were empty—no more foam—and the pain was subsiding to a more normal intensity. Yeah, sure, he thought in English, but the rest of the thought was in Language: the drug must be wearing off. He felt light, almost floating, as if he were in a low-grav field.

Channath's sharp "Now!" as she and the human doctor moved toward the Ranger freed Hovan to kneel beside Steve and raise the man's head.

"You made it, Cor'naya," he said quietly, with pride. "You succeeded, as I was sure you would."

Tarlac forced unwilling eyes open, looking up into the familiar gray face he'd learned to respect, then to love. "I really made it?" he asked in a whisper.

"You really made it," Hovan assured him. "Rest easy now. As soon as Channath and Dr. Jason stop the bleeding, they will give you something for your pain. And when you recover, what a party the clan will have!"

"Clan party…" Tarlac managed a faint smile, his thoughts starting to drift. "Tha'd be nice…"

"Later, Steve." Hovan smiled too, pushing sweat-damp hair away from the man's face. "Rest now, I said. It is over."

"Yeah … guess so. Worth it, though … worth it all. 'M tired … so tired… gotta sleep…" Tarlac's eyes closed and he sighed, going utterly limp.

"Steve?"

There was no answer; Hovan had known there wouldn't be. He had seen too many people die to hold false hopes, and only concern for his ruhar's honor kept him from voicing his outrage to the Lords, his brief but bitter anger at the injustice of their letting Steve complete the Ordeal only to die in his arms.

The human doctor had no such qualms. He turned on Hovan, furious. "Satisfied, you damn Shark? In a hospital I could maybe still save him—not here! No human could survive that kind of pain, system shock, bleeding—not without help! He's dead, and you killed him!"

"Steve wished to bring peace," Hovan interrupted, in English suddenly as fluent as his Language. He noticed it, briefly, but in his anger and sorrow it didn't seem to matter. "The Ordeal was his only chance, and he took that chance knowing this was possible—thinking it was inevitable. Do not dishonor his memory—instead, represent his Empire at his leavetaking."

"What the hell— You mean that, don't you?" Dr. Jason didn't want to believe it, but the Traiti's soft voice, the way he still cradled the Ranger's head, wouldn't allow disbelief. "You're sorry he died!"

"I cared for him, yes," Hovan said. "His death is a thing of much sadness, yet he went to it in full honor, and in his clan. None can expect more from the Lords." He stood, picking up Steve's slight body. "Will you honor him with us?"

"I … yes. You're right. Someone from the Empire should be there."

"Good." Hovan turned and left the gathering hall, taking Steve's body to a small room nearby to carry out a sponsor's most distasteful duty— of preparing the one he sponsored, when that one succumbed, for Presentation and Transformation. The preparations he had been so sure would not be needed had of course been made; the room held what was required. A large table held a container of water with cloths beside it, and the Ranger's uniform was hanging up.

Hovan stripped the body and began to wash it, working as gently as if the man could still feel. Then he dressed Steve Tarlac in the forest green of his Imperial rank, leaving the shirt open to show the man's wounds.

Finished, he inspected the body carefully. Yes, everything was proper. The uniform was spotless, the badge and leather items polished to a high gloss, the gun fully charged. His ruhar would go before the Lords as a Cor'naya of Ch'kara should. He picked up the body again and returned to the foot of the altar dais.

The Supreme, the First Speaker, and Dr. Jason were no longer on the newly-cleaned dais. Transformation was a clan matter; they could observe, but not participate. Instead, Ka'ruchaya Yarra and Speaker Daria were there. Hovan bowed his head to them, then looked up and spoke the ritual words. "I bring Esteban Tarlac of Clan Ch'kara to the Circle of Lords. He has given honor to the clan."

"We sorrow at his loss," Yarra said, "yet we glory in that honor." She turned to the Speaker. "As Ka'ruchaya of Ch'kara, I ask the Lords to receive this man, my ruesten."

Daria inclined her head. "The Lords welcome those who die in honor. Who, Ka'ruchaya, do you choose to present him?"

"He who is closest to him, who shares his blood and bears him now."

Hovan thanked her silently for that. While it was the Ka'ruchaya's choice, tradition suggested that the oldest male present perform that final service for the dead.

The Speaker and Ka'ruchaya drew back to allow him to pass with his burden. He climbed the steps and crossed the dais slowly, to lay his ruhar's body on the lower level of the altar. Then he made his farewells, touching Steve's wounded chest and his forehead. Finally he stepped back and made obeisance to the figures on the upper level, a formal bow.

A shimmering appeared around the body, hazing its outlines but not obscuring it, as Hovan moved to stand at the end of the altar near Steve's head. He would hold vigil there until, at this time the next day, the Lords would take the man to themselves in a flare of blue.

Chapter IX

Was he dead?

Since every definition Tarlac had ever heard referred to the physical body, and since his was

undoubtedly a corpse, he supposed the answer would have to be yes.

But he didn't feel dead. He wasn't in that body any longer; he was a good two meters above it, held there by an immensely powerful, immensely benevolent presence. In the normal course of events, he somehow knew, he'd go elsewhere—to wherever his self found most comfortable or fitting—but for some reason he was supposed to remain here.

Traiti took leave of a clanmate as they greeted a new one, by touching—in his case, touching forehead and wounds as Hovan had, to show respect for one who had died in the Ordeal. Tarlac wanted to tell them that no farewell was necessary, that he was still there and he'd help them survive the coming defeat.

The presence wouldn't let him; the time was not yet right. Instead, he was drawn away, out of Ch'kara's gathering hall and through some kind of interface, to what looked almost like a grove of oak trees on Terra.

It wasn't; the light was wrong. No, he corrected himself, that wasn't it. Everything was too right. What he could see wasn't brighter as much as clearer, and his surroundings—the trees, the grass, even the sky—seemed to have a vibrant internal luminance. This was beauty of a kind no planet could hold, pure and utterly serene.

He might not know what was going on, Tarlac decided, but if this was death, there was a lot to be said for it. He'd have liked to have a body, though, to let him feel and smell as he could somehow see.

There was a feeling of amused agreement, and he did have a body. So did the eleven Traiti

now in the grove with him, three females and seven n'Cor'naya, all of whom shared the luminance of the grove. He knew without looking that he did too, and that he was dressed as his original body was, in open-shirted uniform. He also knew by now who these people were; their images stood on the upper tier of every Traiti altar.

"Welcome, Ruhar," said the one Tarlac recognized as the presence which had brought him here. The voice was as clear and pure as the light. "And welcome to your place in the Circle of Lords."

Tarlac recognized him from the statuettes and from his Vision. He took a deep breath of the sweet, vital air before he spoke. "My place, Lord Kranath? I'm human, not Traiti."

"In body," Kranath agreed, smiling. "In mind you are both, and have been since your conception. We insured that. The human body on Ch'kara's altar means nothing. Here you—and we—can be either. Think of yourself as Traiti, Ruhar."

Remembering his Vision of being Kranath, and before that the time at the altar when he'd felt as much Traiti as human, Tarlac did as he was told. There was a brief indescribable sensation, and when he ran his tongue over sharp triangular teeth, he realized that his experience as Kranath, impressive as it had been, was only a shadow of this— seeming?—reality. He touched his face, ran fingertips along the scars on his chest, extended and retracted powerful claws … yes, this body felt as appropriate as his own. And the grove's other occupants were now in human bodies.

His place, Tarlac thought bemusedly. He didn't think he quite liked that idea, and for a moment he let himself indulge in a fantasy that he hadn't died but was in the middle of a hypoxia-induced hallucination. It didn't last; he knew that what he was experiencing was quite real. He

was in a Traiti body that fit him perfectly well, though he'd prefer the familiarity of his human form.

He felt the sensation of change again, and the glade's Traiti and human Lords returned to the bodies they'd first had. "One's original form is usually best," Kranath agreed calmly.

"You have accepted that we exist," Sepol—Lord of the Ordeal—put in. "And you have accepted the abilities of those who went before. Why, then, are you so reluctant to accept the fact that we have called you to join us?"

Tarlac shrugged. "The same reason, I guess, that I don't like the idea of gods who interfere in mortal affairs. It goes against my grain."

"Relax, Steve," Lord Carle—Tarlac would have said Lady, in English—advised him. "What we do is less different from your earlier work than you can yet realize. And you have time to ease your mind before you absorb the knowledge and powers you are heir to. Sit and drink, Ruhar."

When a tall, cold glass of green liquid appeared in his hand, Tarlac accepted it and sipped. The taste of authentic mint julep recalled the only Kentucky Derby he'd seen in person, shortly before the war; a magnificent chestnut filly named Lady Jess had won.

He let himself enjoy the drink in peace, relaxing his mind as Carle had suggested. If she was right, and he had no reason to think otherwise, he'd know everything soon. He sat crosslegged on the grass, thinking. Now he knew what the First Speaker had meant when she called him "child of two worlds"—and he remembered that before his adoption, Arjen had accepted that Daria's telling Yarra about him had been no breach of security. The Lords, as Traiti clearly knew, told

their Speakers far more than the Speakers passed on. But it seemed odd—

"No," Kranath interrupted the forming thought, "neither bodies nor refreshment are truly necessary. They are pleasant, though, and we often create them." He smiled again, and Tarlac could feel his amusement. "Those who went before left us Godhome, which gave us awesome power, but we remain, if you will excuse the expression, human. We see no reason to deny ourselves such things. Since mind is the architect of reality, we construct what pleases us."

"Mind is the architect of reality." Tarlac took another sip of his julep, then thought about it becoming a mug of coffee. It responded to his will, and he drank; it was the best coffee he'd ever tasted.

"You see?" Sepol said gently. "You are one of us, Lord Esteban, and that fact no longer disturbs you."

Tarlac started to contradict him, then he realized Sepol was right. He did accept what he was —and what he was to become. He still wished they'd explain a few things, though. Why they'd taught him Language, why he'd really had to take the Ordeal, why he'd been rushed through it, and most importantly, why he had been called to the Circle.

"To complete it," Kranath said, sitting beside him and materializing a mug of chovas. "I ended the clan wars, to begin the current cycle of history; a human must end this war, with our help, to begin the next."

The rest of the Lords, except for Sepol and Carle, vanished. "It all ties together, Steve," Carle said. "I taught you Language so you could complete the Ordeal quickly, and so you could

communicate easily with your n'ruhar. We did not teach you forestcraft, because there was something you had to learn for yourself while Hovan taught you that."

Tarlac nodded almost immediately. "How to open up," he said. "Even . . . that I could open up, to love a whole clan and not be ashamed of it."

Kranath nodded. "Yes, and you learned it quickly, despite your human conditioning. I had to learn to be alone, you to be close—even the most minor of gods must know both.

"Someone subject to external limitations, as a Ranger or ruler is, should have no bias. We are limited only by our own feelings, though; everything we do must be tempered by love for our charges."

"External limitations?" Tarlac chuckled. "I'd say I didn't have many!"

"You had the ultimate limitation, Steve. Mortality."

"Huh?" Tarlac found that his coffee had remained at the perfect drinking temperature, and took another swallow.

"You could give almost any order and have it obeyed, granted. But if someone disliked what you did or commanded intensely enough— You have a saying that nobody is safe from a truly determined assassin, not true?"

"I hadn't thought of it like that, but you're right. And you—no, we—can't be killed." Then Tarlac frowned. "Godhome gave you a choice, Kranath. It said you had to be willing—why didn't

I get that option?"

"Did you need it?"

"I don't understand."

"Did you need it?" Kranath repeated. "It seems to me that you had already made the choice."

"Ruhar," Carle said gently, "you have been both Ranger and Cor'naya, earning high status in both societies, and Daria was right when she told you that was vital to peace. Tell me, though: would that have been enough? Were you persuasive enough to convince two star-spanning civilizations to cease ten years of hostility just with words? Is any mortal?"

Tarlac shook his head. "I'm an operator, not much of a diplomat— Linda's the expert at that, and I don't think even she could bring that one off." He looked at them speculatively, then nodded. "I guess I do understand, at that. I did choose this, didn't I? Twice, and without realizing it."

The three other Lords smiled proudly at him. "Yes," Kranath said. "Once when you accepted Ranger Ellman's invitation, once when you accepted the Ordeal. That you were persuaded into both decisions is irrelevant; none of us chose this without persuasion, neither I nor any of the others."

"And I think I know why you need a human Lord, too. We're going to have to work on both sides to end the war. The Imperials would hardly listen to one of you—in your own form, anyway —where they will listen to a Ranger."

Kranath smiled. "Exactly. And as you have correctly surmised, we do not take on each other's forms. Not only would it be dishonorable, it would be unwise; those who hold great power, those to whom we usually need to appear when Speakers' words are insufficient, have enough psionic ability to tell us apart." Kranath projected mild amusement. "Humans included, though they have not as yet developed that ability consciously."

"Which means I'll have to go back to my body. That's the only way to keep intervention to a minimum." Tarlac thought for a moment. "With any luck at all, I won't have to do anything obvious enough for humans to notice. The Empire doesn't need a new human religion to cope with at the same time it acquires a new Sector—if things work out the way I'm hoping."

"You will allow the respective rulers to make the final choice, then."

"I'll give them the information they need to choose intelligently, but I won't tell them what to do." Tarlac sensed approval, and this time knew where it came from; he smiled. "Thanks."

"None necessary, Ruhar," Sepol said. "We are merely pleased that you grasp the necessities, even before your full maturity. Go on."

"Well, I won't be able to avoid open intervention with the Traiti; I'll have to tell all of them what I saw in Kranath's Vision. I don't like showing off like that, but at least they're accustomed to Lords manifesting from time to time."

"I did not like it either," Kranath agreed, "when I had to intervene so to end the clan wars. We all do what must be done, though." He put an arm around the man. "If you are ready, Brother, we should begin." Brother, not ruhar. Tarlac smiled at that human touch. "Yeah. Let's not waste

time." Then he remembered. "Hey, what about Jim? The Empire can't afford to lose two Rangers at once—now less than ever."

"No," Kranath agreed. "He is still in critical condition, but Ranger Medart will recover fully."

"Thank God!" Tarlac exclaimed reflexively.

Then he realized what he'd said, and what he was; he laughed at the irony. "Thanks, Kranath. All right, I guess I'm ready. Go ahead."

With that, he felt the Supreme Lord's immense power enter his mind and begin work. What he'd experienced in the Vision was only a shadow of this reality, but it had prepared him as nothing had prepared Kranath. Despite what he could only think of as having his innermost mind forcibly stretched, then stuffed to near-capacity before being stretched again into what felt like hyperdimensions, he was in absolutely no pain. Instead, he felt…

Exaltation.

He'd been made into what a number of humans and Traiti would be in time. That he could know such glory while others were still so restricted was something that was, with his new knowledge, as inevitable as it was regrettable. Yet, since it was inevitable, his regret was of necessity dispassionate. Others would achieve this state, and he would greet them with joy. In the millennia before then, he had a job to do, helping to guide this galaxy's intelligences as those who went before had intended.

He felt an amusement like Kranath's, but this time it was his own. Humans had established

the Empire and thought themselves and their vitality supreme; but the Traiti supplied the gods, the subtle guidance. And, he now realized, the Irschchans provided—or rather, would provide—ritual to bring those together. The cloudcats, the only race to remember the Others who went before as a vital part of their history, were the observers and reporters. None of them yet knew their parts of the whole, or could be allowed to know until they reached maturity.

For them it would be a natural process. He was the last to be forced to his full potential, to complete the Circle of Lords. He could see now how he'd been quite literally molded, as Kranath had said, from the moment of his conception—and he'd had a mostly-pleasant life. Since he could understand and appreciate the necessity, he could feel no resentment at the manipulation. It was as inevitable, historically, as the Traiti war itself.

Now he had almost total free will, but his mental patterns were long established. He would use his new powers as he had been intended to.

Chapter X

Hovan didn't feel much except fatigue and hunger as the time for Steve's Transformation neared. He'd held vigil for the full day, without sleep or food, and he felt the effects.

It would be over soon, he thought tiredly. The Lords had promised an honorable peace, so he

believed it would come about, though he couldn't imagine how. But it still didn't seem right that Steve had succeeded so well in the Ordeal only to be denied knowing the peace he'd endured it to bring about.

He saw a preliminary flicker of blue and closed his eyes against the expected glare. When seconds passed without it he opened them again, and saw instead gentle blue radiance pulsing from Steve's body.

For a moment he was stunned, unable to believe what it meant. Such things belonged in Speakers' histories, not in life!

Then, slowly, he smiled and nodded to himself. Steve, the human Ranger who had become a Cor'naya in hopes of helping both races, fearing but accepting death for that goal—yes, Steve deserved to complete the Circle of Lords if anyone did.

Yarra and Daria had returned for the Transformation. Hovan exchanged glances with his Ka'ruchaya, but the Speaker stood motionless, her expression one of exaltation—until the radiance vanished and Steve sat up, his wounds healed, swinging his legs over the altar's edge and standing up. Then Daria bowed, hands formally crossed over her chest, and Hovan and the rest of the clan followed suit.

Tarlac watched, without pleasure, his n'ruhar's display of awed reverence—no, outright worship. It was the Traiti way, and necessary to them; his personal dislike of it was irrelevant. To the clan that had adopted him, the people he cherished, he was a god, one of the Circle of Lords —as the new, twelfth statuette which had materialized on every altar showed. He could only accept the homage.

But he was also still of Ch'kara. After a long moment, he said, "Okay, I've changed, but that's enough. We're still n'ruhar."

They straightened, still radiating awe. Tarlac could sense the clan both as an empathic entity and as the individuals composing it: Ka'ruchaya Yarra's joy that one of her n'ruesten had been chosen to complete the Circle, Daria's exultation and love for him and their daughter, Hovan's deep pride that it was he who had adopted and then sponsored the Ranger … even unformed pleasure from the youngling in Daria's body, already a part of the clan's emotional life. Finally he knew exactly what a Traiti clan really was, and how privileged he'd been to be adopted by this one.

It was time now to give them their full heritage, with safeguards he hadn't expected to have when he first made the Decision his Ordeal had demanded. He sensed the other Lords' invisible presence as they prepared to watch over the enormous number of individuals that, despite the war's heavy casualties, still made up the Traiti race. They'd help ease the shock of his revelation, and even though Tarlac would be spread thin imaging himself in so many places, he'd reinforce Ch'kara himself.

He let his love enfold them as theirs had him, before he began to speak to the Traiti race. "You all know of me, and you know I was a Ranger of the Terran Empire. Your Speakers and Ship-Captains have told you why I took the Ordeal and what I've become."

He paused, smiling. "What they didn't tell you, because they didn't know, is what you are. That's a duty I'm glad to perform. The Lords welcomed me to my heritage; let me welcome you to yours."

He paused again, extending his arms as if to embrace them all, and, as Kranath had shown it to him, showed them their true homeworld. He explained their origins and their rescue from Terra. "So," he finished, "you are our relatives, by ancestry as Terran as I am. The Empire has known as little of this as you have, but it will; and by its laws, you're already Imperial citizens."

He felt their consternation at that, their unwillingness to believe they could be part of what they'd fought for so long. Then some began to realize the changes this revelation should bring, and he sensed their first stirrings of real hope. Satisfied with that beginning, he let his image and presence fade from all but two gathering halls, his own and D'gameh's. At D'gameh, he addressed one of the males. "Arjen?"

The Fleet-Captain, wearing brilliant blue-and-gold robes in-clan, bowed deeply. To be name-called by such a one—! "Yes, Lord. How may I serve you?"

Lord. Tarlac shrugged inwardly; it was his title now. "You did a pretty nasty job for the Circle when you picked me up the way you did, and I know how badly it upset you. We appreciate it, and I'd like to ask something else of you that may make up for it, a little. May I?"

"Of course, Lord." This time it was Arjen who didn't know what was going on but couldn't refuse.

"It'll mean cutting your leave short, I'm afraid. I'd like you to have the Hermnaen ready for takeoff tomorrow morning, with just the ship crew, no combat troops. You'll be carrying the human prisoners instead, plus the Supreme, the First Speaker, my sponsor Hovan, and myself."

"You, Lord?" Arjen knew he shouldn't question a god, but why would one want to travel by

ship?

Tarlac understood Arjen's question. "I could transfer myself—or all of us, for that matter—but humans aren't as ready for open divine intervention as Traiti. I'd rather let things seem as normal as possible. Can you arrange for the ship?"

"Of course, Lord. We will be ready at daybreak."

"Thanks." Tarlac returned fully to his mortal body at the Ch'kara clanhome. Arjen's pride in the assignment pleased him; it would ease the Fleet-Captain's lingering discomfort at having violated the body-return signal, even by the First Speaker's—the Lords'—orders. Many in D'gameh shared his uneasiness, and calling Arjen by name would repair the reserve Tarlac had sensed toward him there.

Ch'kara's gathering hall was beginning to empty, his n'ruhar responding to his desire for normality. Finally only a small group remained at the base of the dais: the First Speaker and Supreme; the two physicians, Channath and Jason; and Daria, Hovan, and Yarra.

Jason, the only human, was also the only one who couldn't quite seem to accept the human Ranger's new status. Tarlac appreciated the irony and was amused by it, but it didn't really matter. "Doctor," he said, "I need your professional opinion. Are the prisoners fit to travel?"

The doctor was a professional; his expression hardened. "No, sir, though I can only speak for those held in the same camp with me—"

"That is all of them," the Supreme broke in.

"Okay. Go on, Doctor."

"Yes, sir." Dr. Jason began ticking off objections on his fingers. "We've had marriages, so we've had pregnancies; one's near term, and transition might put her into premature labor. Then there are a couple of new ones, wounded, still on life support, and one the Sharks tortured for information. There are maybe half a dozen others with minor injuries or illness, nothing serious."

He shook his head. "Once the Sharks figure they've gotten all they can from someone, we get medical care the equal of anything the Empire could provide—especially the women." His admiration, however grudging, was obvious. "They're as good at trauma as I've ever seen, and a lot better at gynecology and obstetrics. My wife says she wants a Traiti doctor if she ever gets pregnant. Damned if I know why they're so good."

Tarlac seized that chance to find out how an ordinary Imperial citizen would react to the Traiti sexual imbalance. "I guess you've never seen a Traiti clan instead of their military, have you? Until now?"

"Sir?" Jason looked puzzled, then shook his head. "No, sir, I haven't. Why?"

"How many women would you say Ch'kara has? It's typical."

"I didn't see many, sir, maybe a quarter of the ones here. Guess not even Shark women like seeing someone get hurt."

"He was the Ordeal taking," Yarra said in English. "All who could here be, him to honor, were. You the right percentage saw."

Dr. Jason understood the implications at once. "Jesus H. Christ! They've got to be good with women, then—and childcare, too. But what about my patients?"

"Only four who aren't fit to travel," Tarlac said thoughtfully. "No real problem, then; I can give them support, though it won't be obvious. Take them along, in the Hermnaen's sickbay."

"If you can do that, sir, why can't you heal them?"

"I could, but I'm not going to. You heard what I said about keeping things as normal as possible. If I healed them, I'd be expected to heal others, and it would escalate from there. I'll give them the same chance they'd have if they weren't being moved, no more."

Tarlac didn't like that, but what he'd said was true. Godhome had been right when it told Kranath that refraining from action was often harder than taking it—and that too much intervention would harm, not help, even when it meant allowing suffering and death he could stop by an act of will. He sensed Dr. Jason's resentment at what seemed like callousness, and knew the man simply didn't have the scope to understand. "My word as a Ranger, Doctor. If I do more than the absolute minimum to help your patients, in the long run it could destroy the Empire. And that I will not risk."

"I can't argue, sir," Dr. Jason said grimly. "May I be dismissed to prepare them for the trip?"

"In a moment, Doctor. You're free to tell the prisoners anything you think appropriate about what you've seen here, though I doubt you'll find much belief if you mention my death and return."

Jason shook his head. "I'm not sure I believe that myself, sir, and I was here. I'll just say you passed the Ordeal and we're going to Terra."

Tarlac smiled. "Good. That should satisfy them." He turned to the Supreme. "If you'll provide escorts and transportation?"

"Done, Lord," the Supreme said promptly. "They will be at the Hermnaen by daybreak, as the First Speaker and I will. By your leave, then?" Both rulers bowed formally and held that attitude.

"Granted," Tarlac said. As they straightened, preparing to leave, he turned back to Jason. "Dismissed, Doctor."

When the out-clan visitors had left the gathering hall and Channath had excused herself, Tarlac very deliberately went to Hovan and put his arms around his sponsor, his head on the massive chest. Hovan tensed at the touch, and Tarlac realized the Traiti couldn't help himself.

Tarlac backed off, looking up. This time he had to relax Hovan. "Am I in-clan or not?" he demanded. "I still have today and tonight to be myself, here. If you can't accept me any longer, say so, and I'll meet you aboard ship."

"Lord—"

"Hovan, help me. I've been hurt—hell, I've died—and I'm still shaky. I'm not used to my powers yet, and it takes most of what I can do to reanimate this corpse." That was true enough; Tarlac simply didn't mention that the other Lords would add their power to his if he needed it.

He knew it was a shock for the clan to lose someone in the Ordeal, and only Ch'kara had ever lost a member to the Scarring and had him reappear as a Lord. And he was newly adopted and an alien; it was the clan that needed to be helped most, and calling on it for support would, paradoxically, let it recover most quickly. Yet he knew it was his plea for help, nothing more abstract, that moved Hovan. The Traiti finally embraced him. "You are in-clan, ruhar. Never doubt that. But may I ask why you want me to go?"

His cheek pressed against gray skin, smelling its tension-sharp odor, Tarlac said, "Yes. Partly because I need you, partly because you'll have to translate for the Supreme and First Speaker—Lord Carle gave you an advanced course in English, so your grammar wouldn't cause any misunderstandings—and partly because I plan to recommend that the Empire integrate your Fleet into the Navy and Marines. If you're willing, I'd like to start that by commissioning you myself, before I leave this body for good."

Hovan, absently stroking Steve's hair, looked at his Ka'ruchaya and the clan's Speaker. Yarra nodded approval; Daria, smiling, made a gesture of negation as if to say, "I am not needed to Speak here."

That was true enough, Hovan thought. Steve—Lord Esteban, to give him his proper title—was speaking for himself. "I am willing. Steve, ruhar, you do me great honor."

"No greater than you and Ch'kara did me," Tarlac said, realizing how solemn they all were. He'd prefer a lighter mood. "But hey, this is starting to sound like a mutual admiration society. Would anyone else like some chovas?"

The four adjourned to a small dining hall, to find themselves anticipated. Four mugs of the

steaming beverage waited for them, and they drank silently.

For the rest of the day, Tarlac was given the unobtrusive but unmistakable support that his n'ruhar needed to give—and it helped them moderate awe to the acceptance, casual but touched with deep respect, they held for the other Lords. By evening, their emotions were subsiding to a certain permanent pride that Ch'kara had given a Lord to the Circle. It helped Tarlac, as well. He'd grown pleasantly accustomed to the clan's support and closeness—its love—and he'd regretted the loss of it that seemed inevitable. He came to realize, however, that as long as Ch'kara existed he would have its love, giving him a peace he could never have imagined before attaining his new maturity.

That night, while his body was surrounded by sleeping n'ruhar, Tarlac took advantage of his new powers to explore. Having the freedom of the galaxy was exhilarating, far better than the suit-enclosed EVA he'd enjoyed before. No helmet blocked his view, and if he wanted to, he could perceive the entirety of what surrounded him. He reveled in it, swooping from system to system, observing for himself what Kranath and the others had told him.

He understood the cloudcats and their psionic survival aids perfectly now; he repaired a minor fault in one, though it wasn't yet necessary, for the sheer pleasure of using his new skills.

He looked in on a young Irschchan student, graceful as her feline forebears, with no idea yet of the service she would soon do the Empire and her homeworld alike; he wished her well.

He checked the condition of his friend, James Medart; if Kranath hadn't assured him Jim would live, Tarlac would have been sorely tempted to intervene. Knowing the older Ranger was in critical condition hadn't prepared him for the sight of Jim hooked up to a roomful of life-

support machinery, not in even a low-grav bed but submerged in a tank of rapid-heal solution. That was further evidence of how seriously he'd been wounded; Tarlac had only heard of the technique a couple of months before leaving Terra, as an experimental treatment for massive injuries.

It wasn't quite first-tenth at the clanhome, about 0730 Palace Standard Time, when Tarlac stopped amusing himself and went back to work. His new power made it simple for him to use his ID code alone to access the Imperial priority band, something he'd done before only with highly sophisticated equipment, and project an image of himself in open-shirted uniform to the Palace, to the Emperor's private comset.

He made the comscreen's viewpoint his own, to avoid mistakes, so when the screen activated he found himself looking at the Emperor's head, bent over the inevitable stack of printout paper, from the familiar low right three-quarter view. "Just a minute, please," Davis said tiredly, without looking up.

"Of course, sir." Tarlac sensed the Emperor was too fatigued, too distracted, to recognize his voice right away. His Majesty had changed in the three months since Tarlac had left Terra; his short-clipped hair was almost totally white, his shoulders were less erect, and his shirt more rumpled than he had tolerated then.

When the Emperor did look over at the screen, Tarlac was shocked to see the strain etched into his face. Davis looked ten years older, and utterly worn out. Then fatigue gave way to a startled grin. "Steve! You did it! Will you be back soon?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, to both. I'm on the Traiti Homeworld, and I'll be leaving, aboard one of

their cruisers, in about five hours. Palace ETA is noon tomorrow, your time." He raised a hand to forestall the Emeror's beginning objection. "I know that's impossibly fast by Imperial technology, sir, but we'll be getting a one-time-only boost from a sort of super-computer the Others left here."

"The Others." Davis frowned, then shrugged. "I won't look a gift horse in the mouth. Captain Willis reported what Fleet-Captain Arjen told you. Steve, can you end this damn war?"

"I can't, sir, no. What I can do is arrange things so you and the Traiti rulers, their Supreme and First Speaker, can try to end it."

"Good enough. After those people we massacred on Khemsun, I'll take anything I can get." Davis looked bitter, angry. "Maybe you'd better give me the whole story; I can ask questions later. I don't want you missing your ship."

Tarlac grinned. "They'd wait for me, sir, but that is a good idea. And if you wouldn't mind taping it, I think it should be made public."

"You're the Ranger on-scene; recommendation accepted." Davis touched a control on his comset. "All right, Ranger Tarlac. This is for the record."

"Very well, Your Majesty. I assume the record already holds the Empress Lindner's log tapes."

"That is correct. Go on."

"Yes, sir." Tarlac began with his first meeting with Hovan and went on to the adoption, a

description of Homeworld and the Traiti civilians which included their gender ratio, his greeting at the Ch'kara clanhome, his special Language lesson—"The Traiti attribute it to the Circle of Lords, their gods; whether to believe it was them or the Others' computer, which this report will describe later, will have to be an individual decision."

Then, in an outline that would be suitable for public release, he told of his seduction by Daria and her subsequent pregnancy.

Davis stopped the recording. "Are you sure you want that on record, Steve? If you pass the psych retests—" He broke off at the look on Tarlac's face. "You're that sure you'd fail, then."

"No doubt about it, sir. I shouldn't have passed them the first time, any more than Shining Arrow should have. Sharing young is an important part of the Ordeal because their best have to be fertile. Daria and our daughter are important to me, Ch'kara is important to me— personally. This is my last mission … but I can't regret even that, if it brings peace and keeps them alive."

The Emperor sighed heavily. "Another one down. You say you were allowed news intercepts —did they mention that Jim's been critically wounded?"

"Yes, sir, the day before my Scarring. Shall I continue?"

"Go ahead." Davis touched "Record" again, and nodded.

Tarlac described his schooling and wilderness experience with no particular emphasis, and then had the screen show Kranath's Vision, as he and Godhome remembered it, translating the Language. He waited, ready to give the Emperor the same emotional support he'd given Ch'kara

if it were needed.

It wasn't, quite, though Davis was shaken enough to stop recording again when it ended. "Good God, Steve! You know what'll happen when the newsies get their hands on that!"

"Yes, sir, and there's worse to come. At our first meeting, the First Speaker promised me a tape of the initial contact. I gave you Kranath's Vision first, for background. Now here's the contact tape."

He showed it, feeling Davis' helpless rage, so like his own when he'd seen it, as it played and was recorded. The Emperor hit the "Stop" button with his clenched fist when it was over, cursing in a language Tarlac had never heard but which sounded remarkably well suited for that purpose. Davis spun the tape back and watched the first contact again. When it ended the second time, he looked haunted. "All right, Steve. Finish your report."

Tarlac did so, conscious that after the contact tape, the story he was telling sounded a bit anticlimactic. "I had to tell them about our common heritage, of course," he finished, "and to be believed, I had to finish the Ordeal. So here I am, with Honor scars. And that's it, sir."

Davis touched his controls again, and Tarlac was suddenly conscious of his intense scrutiny, his reputation for almost telepathic discernment. "Is it, Steve?" he asked quietly.

"He is close to the truth," Kranath's thought came. "Will you deny it to him?"

"No," Tarlac replied. "I told him it was up to the individual, and if he figures it out, okay. Working it like this, not many should, even though the Traiti won't keep it any secret."

"Will you then confirm it for him?"

"He won't need it."

The Emperor nodded slowly. "You never could play poker, Steve. You've been holding out on me, and just now you were thinking of… something. And maybe you've made a couple of mistakes. Your transmission—or should I say illusion?—doesn't have a background. That might have a lot of causes, but could Kranath's Vision have been a reenactment? There were no mindprobes around five thousand years ago to record it." He glanced again at the comscreen control panel, its master switch turned off. "You, or part of you, is right here, Lord Esteban Tarlac—isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Tarlac admitted, unable to repress a smile and a rueful headshake. "A moment ago Lord Kranath told me you were close to the truth and asked me what I intended to do about it. Absolutely nothing, except to ask you not to make it official. If I'm being so obvious, too many people may pick up on it anyway."

"It wasn't obvious, except to someone who knows you well. I don't think anyone but your… former… colleagues will catch it. And I won't make it official; you know the Empire doesn't promote any religion. But—will you give the Empire the same support your new colleagues give the Traiti?"

Tarlac laughed, relieved that the Emperor could see and grasp this opportunity as readily as ever, in spite of the circumstances. "Your Majesty, if this succeeds, all of us will be working for the interests of both races combined."

A driving surge of hope erased some of the Emperor's fatigue. "What do you want me to do?"

The next morning, as promised, the Supreme and First Speaker met Tarlac and Hovan at the Hermnaen's loading ramp. Fleet-Captain Arjen, in uniform again and obviously proud of this honor, was waiting to greet them. He bowed respectfully to the human in Ranger green. "Lord Esteban."

Tarlac touched his shoulder, to emphasize the fact that he was still using a physical body. "Not necessary for now, Fleet-Captain. Let's keep things looking as normal as possible."

Arjen straightened. "Yes, Lord."

Tarlac turned to the two rulers. "During the night I contacted the Emperor and asked him to order a cease-fire; it should be taking effect by now. Would you give the same order?"

"Of course, Lord," the Supreme replied. "But how can it reach all our ships in time?"

"The same way I contacted them yesterday," Tarlac told him. "Just talk at me as if you were giving the order over a transmitter."

Taking him at his word, the two rulers gave the orders and Tarlac relayed their images and words to the Traiti ships' communications equipment, as he had activated the Palace's comm channels the night before. There were no objections from the Fleet, though acknowledgments ranged from almost enthusiastic to openly skeptical. Tarlac passed them all along, thinking that it didn't matter. With racial survival at stake, the Lords would be monitoring both the human and the Traiti ships. There would be no accidental—or intentional—infractions of the cease-fire.

Once they boarded the Hermnaen, Tarlac accompanied Arjen to the control central and took a place standing behind Arjen and Ship-Captain Exvani. Liftoff was routine until the ship reached the safe transition distance of ten diameters out. Then Tarlac spoke up. "Master Pilot?"

"Yes, Lord?"

"Program out-transition for Terra's position exactly one day from now, please."

The Master Pilot, unlike the Emperor, showed no surprise at the speed that order implied, and moments later there was the twisting sensation of hyperspace entry. The sensation continued for almost a minute rather than brief seconds, however, and the viewscreens, when they cleared, showed swirls of shifting color instead of the featureless gray of hyperspace.

There were exclamations of surprise and awe. Nobody asked questions, but Tarlac could feel their intense curiosity, and decided it would do no harm to satisfy it. "This dimension is to hyperspace as that is to normspace; it allows speeds roughly two hundred times as fast as hyperflight."

"Leyar's Dimension?" Arjen asked.

"Yes. He has the beginnings of the theory worked out, but it'll be awhile yet before it'll be of any practical use." Tarlac did not say that it would be a long while. Unlike Nannstein's theory of gravitics, which had led directly to hyperdrive, ultraspace theory held no clues to its practical applications; it would be several centuries before those were worked out. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to brief the First Speaker and Supreme."

"Of course, Lord. They and Team-Leader Hovan are in Ship-Captain Exvani's quarters, and mine have been prepared for you."

And you don't regret the loss of privacy a bit, Tarlac thought, amused. "Thanks, Fleet-Captain. I'll be back here for out-transition; even with the cease-fire, I don't think the defense satellites would be willing to let you by without my authorization."

"As they should not," Arjen said approvingly. "Individually, Lord, human fighters leave much to be desired—but in groups they equal us, and they are far more numerous."

"That's why those who went before moved you instead of us, remember?" Tarlac was delighted to be able to speak so openly, even jokingly, of facts the Traiti race now accepted.

"Yes, Lord." Arjen couldn't help smiling. There was something about this Lord who had been a Ranger, something that put him at ease rather than keeping him at the distance the other Lords inspired. Perhaps it was the man's youth, or his small size, but whatever it was, Arjen liked Lord Esteban.

Tarlac sensed that and smiled as he left the control central. If the Traiti saw Kranath as a father figure, and the other ten Lords as n'ruchaya, sharing that parenthood with the Supreme Lord, but saw Tarlac as the "youngling" of the Circle, that was fine with him. He'd had all the isolation and deference his Imperial rank demanded for fifteen years, and he thought he'd prefer to spend the next few millennia with the easy warmth he sensed from Arjen, from Ch'kara—and in fact from all the Traiti.

When the Hermnaen out-transitioned, it was a cautious hundred and fifty thousand kilometers

from Terra, and Tarlac was satisfied that he'd briefed the three who would accompany him to the Palace as well as he could without actually telling them what to do.

He was in the control central again, at the communications console. Activating the screen, he tuned to the Imperial guard channel. "Fleet Headquarters, this is Ranger Tarlac."

The reply was prompt. "This is Headquarters, Ranger. You are cleared to land at the Palace field at your convenience. All other traffic has been diverted, since your pilot can't be familiar with our landing conventions. The landing beacon is on, and please report passing Defsat Five. Do you copy?"

"Roger, I copy, and thank you. Tarlac out."

"Headquarters out."

Tarlac looked over at the Master Pilot. "It's all yours. Take us down."

"Aye, Lord."

Watching critically, Tarlac had to admit there was very little difference in efficiency between the crews at the Hermnaen's control central and on the Empress Lindner's bridge. If the Hermnaen's seemed to have a bit of an edge at present, it was understandable; the Lindner's would have made as good a showing, taking a Traiti VIP to Homeworld.

They passed Defsat Five half a dozen kilometers out, Tarlac making the necessary call to confirm their landing clearance. Then the pilot took them down, slowly and precisely, following

the beacon.

Tarlac took nostalgic pleasure in what he knew would be his last ship-descent. This view had always been a favorite of his: the clear, windless sight of the sun reflecting off Antarctic snowfields. A dark speck appeared at the foot of the Sentinel Mountains, the modified defense screen that protected the Imperial Palace and a circle fifty kilometers around it from the harsh environment. The speck grew, beginning to show detail. The Palace itself was a good four kilometers square, the largest single building ever constructed by humans, combining elements from all of Terra's cultures in a feat of engineering made possible by Nannstein's genius. Tarlac thought it was magnificent, and it was virtually a self-contained city. Gardens and parkland surrounded it for ten kilometers, with administrative and residential areas beyond that, also carefully landscaped.

Once those details became visible, it was only moments until the Hermnaen set down on the Palace's landing field, which was big enough to serve a system capital and as well fortified as a planetary defense base. Even the Emperor's private landing pad near the Palace wall could be covered by a heavy disruptor cannon. The Hermnaen, here, was as vulnerable as the Lindner had been when she was englobed by Arjen's fleet.

As he had arranged, Tarlac met the other three at the main entry ramp. The coming encounters wouldn't be easy for them; they simply had no experience in coping with other cultures. He could sense their apprehension, their carefully-fostered self-confidence, as the hatch cycled open and the ramp extended. "Take it easy," he said softly. "You'll do fine."

The Supreme smiled at him. "We will do our best, Lord."

"I know." Tarlac, accustomed to the imposingly massive beings, still found them impressive. To anyone else on Terra, the effect would be even greater. And the Traiti were dressed for the occasion. Hovan was in uniform, armed with dagger, shortsword, and gun, everything but his blast-rifle; the First Speaker wore the bright green robe of her office; and the Supreme, in honor of the new Lord, wore Ch'kara-style blue trousers and silvery open shirt, with, naturally, his dagger. They were impressive, Tarlac thought.

The scene outside the ship was no more than he'd expected. There was a huge crowd, mostly news reporters with everything from tiny still cameras to holo gear which was barely portable. They were being held back by Palace Guards, Imperial Marines in traditional dress blues. Only the small honor guard Tarlac had recommended came forward to meet the four of them, ten Marines and a Ranger whose long black hair was held out of his face by a headband the same green as his uniform and dress cloak.

The two Rangers exchanged salutes before Tarlac accepted his own cloak from the Marine carrying it, swung it over his shoulders, and fastened the chain. It was a long time since he'd worn the heavy garment with its silver trim and embroidered Imperial Seal, and he took a moment to arrange it so it would hold his shirt open instead of closed over his scars.

Once he was satisfied, he made the introductions. "Crown Prince Rick Forrest, may I present the Traiti Supreme and First Speaker, and my sponsor, Team-Leader Hovan."

The three bowed; Forrest saluted again. "Welcome to Terra. I've been told that only Team-Leader Hovan speaks much English, but that you can all understand some."

"That is correct," Hovan said.

"Good enough. Now if you'll come with me, His Majesty is waiting to receive you."

"We you thank," the First Speaker said, using, Tarlac knew, most of her limited English.

Then, each flanked by two of the Marines, they moved toward the Palace's immense main entrance. As they neared it, the newsies crowded closer and began clamoring for information, shouting questions, brandishing cameras and microphones. The Rangers, long accustomed to network competition, paid little attention to the aggressive mob scene; this was a big story, one of the biggest, and the newsies' behavior was expectable. They didn't mean any harm, but Tarlac sensed a growing concern from the two Traiti males for the First Speaker's safety.

Tarlac kept walking, outwardly impassive, as he sent them reassurance. "I know the newsies are a bit overwhelming, but there's no danger. They're just doing their jobs, sending this story all over the Empire. Traiti monitoring stations will pass it on to your worlds, too." That helped; the three Traiti relaxed a little.

Arjen, on the Hermnaen, was too busy to relax. There were vehicles approaching, white ones marked with the scarlet cross and crescent that distinguished human medical equipment. He called sickbay and reached Dr. Jason. "Vehicles are for your people coming, Doctor. Your patients will first off-loaded be, if they ready are."

"They're ready," a tired-looking Jason said. "Can you send the medics here—and keep the newsies out?"

"Of course," Arjen replied. "The Marines will that insure, Lord Esteban says, and the patients will be to the Palace medical unit taken."

"The Palace medcenter?" Jason sighed, looking less tired. "That's a relief; it's probably the best hospital in the Empire. Did he say anything about the rest of us?"

"You will be to regional facilities for checks taken, Bethesda and one I find hard to say."

"Akademgorod?" Dr. Jason asked, his expression suddenly eager.

"Yes. Your families are being there taken, and after you fully checked are, you will be with them reunited." Arjen smiled himself at that thought. "I hope you all of yours well find."

"Thanks. But if you'll excuse me, I've got to get back to work."

"As do I." Arjen cut the circuit.

In the Palace, the Throne Room doors began to swing open and a fanfare sounded. "Okay, here we go," Tarlac said. "Remember, don't kneel when you're presented, even if some of the courtiers do. You're not part of the nobility."

"We will remember," the First Speaker said.

Tarlac didn't have time to say any more, as the fanfare was replaced by the first notes of Williams' Imperial Anthem, and they had to make their entrance.

It was a long, slow, ceremonious walk from the door to the Throne, since this was a full-scale Grand Audience. The courtiers, nobles and their guests—those who had managed to make it to the Palace on such short notice—all had a chance to study the open-shirted, scarred Ranger and

the massive gray-skinned beings with him. They knew Traiti from pictures, but none of these had seen them in the flesh.

And more than their presence here drew comment. Two of the aliens were armed, in the Imperial Presence! Normally only Rangers and Life Nobles had that privilege, and seeing enemies so honored brought angry murmurs, even after the tapes all present had seen of Tarlac's account of the Ordeal, of Kranath's Vision.

Tarlac heard the murmurs and smiled. If they thought this was bad, just wait! His plans were going smoothly; if the emotional currents he sensed continued, it was likely that soon these courtiers would be glad for the Traiti's arms.

Hovan was beginning to feel uneasy as he followed Steve down the red carpet toward the Throne, and he wasn't quite able to place the reason. It wasn't the humans' anger; Steve had warned them to expect that at first. And it wasn't the strangeness of being on Terra, or even in the Palace's Throne Room. This, despite its size and splendor, bore a strong similarity to a gathering hall, even though its dais supported the Throne instead of an altar. This place felt out-clan, nothing more sinister. His unease was due to something else, something his combat-honed senses insisted was like walking into an ambush. He sighed inwardly. If there was going to be trouble, why hadn't Steve said anything?

But Steve was a Lord now, he reminded himself, and it was axiomatic that Lords did things their own ways for their own reasons. All he could do was remain alert, prepared to take any action that might seem necessary.

As they neared the Throne, Hovan found himself more impressed than he'd thought he would

be. Twin columns of swirling silver flanked Emperor Charles Davis where he sat in the rather plain, high-backed wooden chair that was the Throne, on its meter-high marble dais. He wore green-and-silver robes and a silvery crown ornamented with winged stars; the scepter he held matched it. The regalia could not disguise the strain lines engraved in his face, but he was smiling slightly, and so was Crown Prince Forrest, from his place behind the Emperor's left side.

Davis gave the group a sober examination before he spoke. "Ranger Tarlac. We are pleased at your return, and at your successful completion of the Traiti Ordeal of Honor. According to Captain Willis, that means you are bringing Us the peace We wish."

"I bring a good chance for peace, Your Majesty, in the persons of the Traiti rulers and Team-Leader Hovan, who gave me the support and training I needed to survive the Ordeal." Tarlac repressed a smile at that misleading technicality. He'd survived, yes—for less than a minute.

"We welcome them to the Empire. You have learned their Language; will you act as translator for Us?"

"Of course, sir."

"Good. As you asked Us to, We have released the tapes you showed Us yesterday, so their contents are common knowledge; you need not go into those facts again."

"Thank you, sir." Tarlac turned to the Supreme and First Speaker, and translated the exchange.

"Now," Davis said, his tone even more serious, "We understand that it is a cultural problem

which has brought about this civil war between the Empire and some of Our separated citizens."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Their culture and its imperatives are quite different from ours—but I'm proud to have been adopted by Clan Ch'kara and to call Hovan my brother."

Davis nodded, and focused his attention on the two rulers. "We hope to end this fratricidal conflict, which has recently, for the first time, cost you women and children We understand you can ill afford to lose. Have you any suggestions as to how We can do that?"

Imperial usage, Hovan thought as he watched, had sounded foolish when Steve described it aboard ship, but coming from the Emperor now, it sounded both solemn and appropriate.

It was the Supreme, since this was primarily a secular matter, who answered through Tarlac. "The Ranger has told us that our Terran origin entitles us to Imperial citizenship, and that any citizen has the right to petition the Throne."

Davis nodded. "It is a citizen's basic right, one which has prevented much injustice. We invite you to present yours."

The Supreme indicated the First Speaker. "Then, Your Majesty, we petition life for our people. Ranger Tarlac has told you that we cannot surrender; as your troops advance, we will all die as surely as those of Clan L'sor died. It is death with honor to die in defense of the clan, but it is death for all of our race, and I do not think Your Majesty wants that any more than we want it."

"We do not," Davis said firmly, "and there is a way to prevent it. Ranger Tarlac has told you of the Imperial policy regarding governments which already exist on inhabited planets, has he

not?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. The Irschchan system is still ruled by their White Order, and the cloudcats of Ondrian have kept their own ways. Those, however, are local governments. Our civilization, like yours, is interstellar in scope."

"We consider that the principle is the same for a Sector as for a planet or a system. Do you disagree?"

"We do not, Your Majesty. We agree fully."

"Then hear Our Edict." Davis stood, raising the scepter. "We rule that the war came about because of a mutual misunderstanding between two groups of Imperial citizens, one of which was unaware of that status, and that no blame may be attached to either group.

"Further, we invite the Supreme and First Speaker to swear fealty to the Empire, that the Traiti may take their rightful place in Our Realm. In exchange, We offer confirmation of their status as rulers of the new Traiti Sector, subject only to the restrictions that apply to all Sector Dukes."

It was the offer Lord Esteban had said would probably be made, and the Traiti had no hesitation, after his earlier briefing, about accepting it. They knelt and swore the oaths of fealty that made them Imperial nobles.

"We accept your fealty," the Emperor said, "and in return pledge Our support." He touched both rulers on the shoulders with his scepter. "Rise, my Lord Dukes."

They did, smiling when Tarlac had to use the Language term for his own status as he translated. Hovan smiled too, feeling a sense of fulfillment. Steve had done it! This was what he'd offered his life to achieve, expecting only a death he'd thought would be final. He had brought peace, peace the Traiti could accept with full honor—peace that meant life for Ch'kara, for Sandre and the twins, for Daria and the youngling she shared with Steve. Hovan knew there would be details to work out, still—details that might take years—but Steve had made that working out possible.

Then Tarlac turned to the Emperor. "Sir, I'd like to administer an oath now, with your permission. Team-Leader Hovan is a commando, an experienced officer who's come up through the ranks as all of their officers have, and in my opinion he would be an asset to the Empire. I've offered him a commission in the Marines."

"Permission granted," Davis said with a rare smile. "We would be most pleased to have one with the qualifications you told Us about yesterday in Our armed forces."

"Thank you, sir." Tarlac turned to Hovan and said quietly, "Let's do this right. You face the crowd."

Hovan did so, glancing over the brightly-dressed courtiers. His unease was stronger now, though no better defined, and he was still tense, alert for action. Something was definitely wrong here, something in the subtle readiness of a small group nearby—

Steve's voice broke into his thoughts. "Raise your right hand and repeat after me: 'I, Hovan of Clan Ch'kara, do solemnly swear …"

Hovan did as Steve told him. "I, Hovan of Clan Ch'kara, do solemnly swear … to protect and defend the Terran Empire … from all enemies, foreign and domestic … and to bear true faith and allegiance to the same. This I pledge before the Lords, by my own honor and Ch'kara's."

Tarlac lowered his hand and extended it. "Congratulations, First Lieutenant Hovan, and welcome to Imperial Service."

Hovan was reaching to take Steve's hand when his misgivings became reality. He spotted movement, a flash of light on gunmetal, and everything happened at once. Hovan was already reacting as he heard the bark of a slugthrower and saw the spurt of flame. His dagger flew for its target, a human screamed—

—and Steve was spun around and hurled to the floor by a heavy slug in the center of his back. Anticipation and combat-sharpened reflexes let Hovan get halfway to the assassin before the Palace Guards could act. By the time they'd surrounded the group, a snarling Hovan had the man who'd used the gun in custody, one claw-extended hand clamped on his neck and shoulder while he rammed the muzzle of his blaster against the base of the man's skull.

The human was shivering, fearful yet defiant. "Get your hands off me, you damn Shark! And get your knife out of my shoulder!"

"You'll be patched up," the Guard Major in charge said grimly. "Long enough to take a mindprobe, anyway." He reached under his blouse for a pair of handcuffs, put them on the prisoner, and turned to his squad. "Take this one to the medical unit, the rest straight to Security."

Hovan released the assassin with a shove. "What will be done with him? And why would he

shoot Ranger Tarlac?"

"Did you see the button he was wearing?" the Major asked. At Hovan's nod, he went on. "He's a Humanity Firster. They're a bunch of fanatics and troublemakers, though we never thought anyone, even one of them, would be stupid enough to do something like this. He'll be mindprobed to learn his accomplices—and how he managed to smuggle even an old-style gun into the Palace. What he did's on record, on Security monitor tapes and probably the newscasters' gear as well. He'll be shot."

The Major paused, then smiled. "I never thought I'd say this to a Traiti, Lieutenant Hovan, but —well done. I could wish you were in my command."

"I thank you, Major. But for now I am the only one of Ch'kara, here, and I must hold my ruhar's death-watch." He remembered the wording Steve had said was correct for requests. "By your leave, sir?"

"All right, Lieutenant, go to him."

Hovan knelt beside the inert form, his only emotion curiosity. His mourning was done; Steve had died and joined the Lords days ago, and Hovan had known he couldn't remain limited to his body—but why choose to leave it this way, with the indignity of being attacked from behind?

Guards had surrounded Emperor Davis at the first sign of trouble, and he motioned them back so he could look down at the scene: Hovan kneeling over Tarlac's bloody form as medics moved in, the Supreme shielding the First Speaker with his body, the courtiers milling around in confusion. Yes, events were working out as Tarlac had predicted.

He seated himself again and called, "Cor'naya Hovan."

Hovan looked up. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Come here, please."

Hovan approached the Emperor and bowed. "Sire?"

Speaking too quietly for the newsies' mikes to pick up his words, Davis said, "Steve asked me to give you a message after he left. I'll have you brought to my working office when this Audience is over, and give it to you there." He raised his voice to its previous level. "Cor'naya Hovan, since Ranger Tarlac's mother is not present, you are his closest available kin. We must ask if you wish to make funeral arrangements yourself, or if you prefer Us to make them."

"The Lords have already accepted him, Sire. He should have the human ceremony, whatever his rank deserves, and I do not know that."

"Very well, We will see to it. If you wish to accompany him, the medics are ready to take him to the morgue. And, Lieutenant—you have Our thanks for the way you captured that assassin. Please inform the Supreme and First Speaker that they will be taken to guest apartments until you are free to translate for Us."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

It was almost a tenthday later—two hours, Hovan reminded himself, in human terms—when a young Marine in Palace Guard dress blues entered the morgue where Hovan was watching

technicians prepare Steve's body. Their impersonality was unpleasant to him, and it was a relief to turn his attention to the NCO. Hoping he was reading the woman's insignia correctly, Hovan said, "Yes, Sergeant?"

"The Emperor would like to see you, sir. I'm to escort you to his office."

Hovan nodded, careful not to smile at the woman's expression. It would only make her obvious apprehension worse. But, once they were out of the morgue and seated in one of the small null-grav cars that served as interior transport, he did say, "I will not bite you, you know."

"I…" The Marine hesitated. "No, sir. My mind knows you won't, but my stomach's a lot less certain. And, sir—I've never even heard of a junior officer being granted a private audience!"

That was all until the shuttlecar pulled up before a door that was flanked by a pair of Palace Guards. As Hovan climbed out, the young Marine said, "Lieutenant Hovan, to see His Majesty." There was an air of tension from the Guards as Hovan approached the door, but neither of them said anything; one simply opened the door for him and closed it when he was inside.

Davis was waiting, now in a Ranger's plain forest green, seated at a functional steel desk. He spoke before Hovan could bow. "No formalities at this meeting, Hovan, though it probably won't happen again. I think that armchair can handle your mass; have a seat."

Hovan sat, carefully as the chair creaked, but it held. "You said Steve left a message for me, Your Majesty."

Davis leaned forward. "Yes. He told me quite a bit yesterday, while you were still on

Homeworld. For one thing, he said that you were as important in bringing this peace about as he was, that if it hadn't been for your help, he'd never have made it through the Ordeal."

Hovan shook his head. "That is too much credit, Sire. I did no more than any sponsor should."

"That may be true, and I'll ask you to hold to that in public, but we both know Steve's right, too. You did a sponsor's duty, yes—for an alien, an enemy, and with a degree of sympathy no one could expect. You acted exactly like what he called you, his brother."

"I was, yes. And I am glad that he saw the peace he wanted so. But that he should die as he did…"

"I know what he's become," Davis said. "I guessed, and he confirmed it. He's not dead, as either of us understand death. And the assassination today was part of his plan. So was your capture of that Firster. He couldn't tell you in advance, since he wanted your reactions to be spontaneous, and he asked me to say he regrets not being able to tell you, and hopes you understand."

"I am not surprised," Hovan said, "though I do not truly understand. I would not have disgraced him."

"He didn't think you would, Hovan. But you're no actor, you don't hide what you feel. It was obvious to everyone that you didn't know what was going to happen, and that you were angry at the Firster." Davis leaned back, looking satisfied. "You knew Steve well enough to know how he hated waste."

"Yes, Sire."

"Well, this time he outdid himself. Humanity Firsters have been trouble for years, and they've been getting more active lately, so Steve decided to let them incriminate themselves, by stopping the security scanners for long enough to let that one through with his weapon. He said his future-sense was still unreliable, but he predicted what would happen today, in outline. And so far the events have had the effects he intended.

"After you left, the Throne Room turned into chaos. Shooting a Ranger in the back, especially here in the Palace, lost the Firsters any popular support they had. Your immediate defense of the Empire, and the way you took that man without killing him—people didn't expect that from a Traiti—have started gaining sympathy for you." Davis shook his head. "There've been some results already. The newsies are demanding interviews with any Traiti they can get hold of, especially you, the First Speaker, and the Supreme—in that order. I can have you protected from them, if you want."

"Steve did not like reporters," Hovan said, "and from what I have seen, I do not either. But that must be part of his plan, so I will meet with them."

"Good, because you're right. It is part of what he hoped for. Public relations can make people realize you're part of the Empire now, not enemies. The newsies are good for some things, no matter how aggravating they are at times."

"Steve brought peace, with all honor; that is the important thing. He has truly earned our title for him."

"He has a title beyond 'Lord'?"

"We call him 'Peacelord.'"

"Peacelord." Davis nodded. "A good epitaph for anyone. 'Esteban Tarlac, Ranger and Peacelord.'"

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